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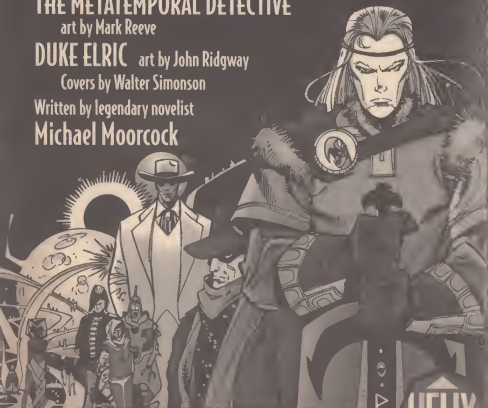
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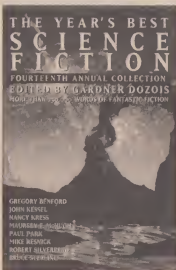
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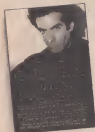
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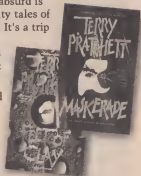
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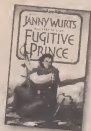
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EDITORIAL

GORDON VAN GELDER

THERE WAS A story in the news last May about Boris Yeltsin announcing that Russian missiles would no longer be aimed at the United States. The news got confusing as there was some talk of bad translations, and Mr. Yeltsin's advisors were remanding his statement, and then I lost track as it was just a brief bit of news about missiles anyway.

Hmm. Just a brief bit of news about missiles.

It wasn't all that long ago when Soviet weapons were front-page news, when bomb shelters and the risk of nuclear war were immediate facts of life. But now nuclear weapons have been with us for more than fifty years, two full generations have grown up in their shadow, and nobody has "pushed the button" since the bombing of Nagasaki in 1945. *Homo sapiens* has demonstrated pretty convincingly that it can play safely with its big toys.


Of course, one of the main ways humans learn how to handle their toys (and how to play with each other) is by telling each other stories. On a basic level, science fiction and other myths often function in this manner, as warnings: if this goes on, you'll be sorry. (I think Ray Bradbury said once that he wrote stories like *Fahrenheit 451* not to predict the future, but to prevent it.)

These warnings take the form of stories because the lessons have much more meaning when they come in the form of shared experience. Nobody listens to Cassandra when she says, "Don't touch those bombs," but people remember a story like Ward Moore's "Lot" when it takes an average family and makes you feel — really *feel* — the panic they experience as they evacuate their homes and the city in which they live. Stories like Judith Merrill's *Shadow on the Hearth* or Lester del Rey's "Nerves" bring the lessons home by letting you learn them through

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When it comes to stories of nuclear disaster, the paragon remains Walter M. Miller, Jr.'s *A Canticle for Leibowitz*. *Canticle* brilliantly follows the post-nuclear rebirth of civilization by tracing it via the desert monastery of the Brothers of the Order of Saint Leibowitz. The novel consists of three novellas, originally published here in 1955 through 1957, portraying the monastery (and society) at intervals of roughly six hundred years. The first part is dedicated to finding and preserving as much of the pre-Armageddon material and information as possible — here is where the sacred document “Pound pastrami, can kraut, six bagels — bring home for Emma” appears, along with a 1040 form bearing the word “damn!” and other papers. In the second part, a brother at the monastery is able to use old technology to develop an electric light source, thus ushering in a new era of progress...which leads to the final era, in which society comes again to the brink of nuclear disaster.

Most of you don't need even this little plot synopsis, I'm sure. What few of you who haven't read *A Canticle for Leibowitz* are strongly encouraged to find a copy and treat yourselves.

As you're reading it, though, try to imagine how much impact the book must have had forty years ago when it first appeared (the book came out in 1959). Consider how much the book is a product of its time — a passionate outcry against a society caught up in an arms and technology race, a society in which paranoid McCarthy hearings led to the blacklisting of Communist sympathizers while Civil Defense advocated that wholesome American families all build their own bomb shelters. Much of the Cold War era looks like lunacy in retrospect, but it was serious business then, as the enduring power of such artistic reactions to it as *Canticle* testifies.

The sequel to *Canticle*, *Saint Leibowitz and the Wild Horse Woman*, is an altogether different sort of book. Slower, longer, and narrower in its focus, *Saint Leibowitz* chronicles the life of Brother Blacktooth St. George, a monk born approximately forty years after the creation of the electric generator chronicled in *Canticle*. (That is, the events of this novel chronologically occur after the end of the second section of *Canticle* and long before the start of section three.)

The book begins — I'm not giving too much away here — with

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Blacktooth at the age of thirty and anxious to leave the monastery, having determined it is not his calling. When he inserts a gloss into a sacred text he translated and inadvertently forgets to add his attribution, he is threatened with excommunication. Cardinal Elia Brownpony saves him, however, by offering him a position as his interpreter (Blacktooth, like Brownpony, was born a Nomad and he has a knack with their various languages). Blacktooth accepts the offer and finds himself part of a company traveling to the city of Valana for a Conclave to elect a new Pope.

That's about where the action of "God Is Thus" picks up, and I'll refrain from synopsisizing any more of the plot, except to say in very general terms that the novel is about the Papacy and growing unrest among the many territories.

More importantly, the book is about Blacktooth's search for faith, and in this regard it's a much more personal novel than was *A Canticle for Leibowitz* — by focusing on just one character, the story explores his nature and his world at great depth, and investigates matters of spirit that Miller's first novel only hinted at.

But *Saint Leibowitz and the Wild Horse Woman* does feel like a

product of its times as well. Just as Miller's first novel rebelled against the lunacy of the nuclear arms race, his final novel shuns the madly merchandised, mall-ridden, media-driven world of the 1990s (and, indeed, most of the Twentieth Century). Blacktooth's story instead pursues the deeper truths of the self and the spirit, making the book both timely and timeless.

Walter Miller himself, by most accounts, tended to shun society; he portrayed himself in *Beyond Armageddon* (1985) as an alligator hiding in a swamp, and Joe Haldeman related in *Locus* (Feb. 1996), "He wasn't in the phone book, but we had the same agent, Bob Mills. I asked Bob how to get in touch with him and he said not even to try. The guy was a total recluse." Joe did eventually meet and become friends with Walter Miller, and from his account I suspect that the science fiction community (accustomed as it is to having writers turn out regularly for conventions) has exaggerated his reclusivity...but I also come away from *Saint Leibowitz* with a strong sense of a man who valued the pursuit of deeper truths more highly than he valued material goods.

Mr. Miller died in 1996. His works and his spirit live on. ♣

Walter M. Miller, Jr. had finished about eighty-five percent of Saint Leibowitz and the Wild Horse Woman when he died in 1996 at the age of 73. The novel was ably completed by Terry Bisson, to whom I'm grateful for recommending this early section as one of the few episodes of the novel that functions as a stand-alone story. What little background you might need for this tale is in this issue's editorial; mostly, though, you just need some appreciation for a master of science fiction at the top of his form, and I suspect you already have that.

God Is Thus

By Walter M. Miller, Jr.

BLACKTOOTH RODE WITH the driver as they bumped along the north road toward the mountain passes. He never once looked back at the Ab-

bey. The Axe was with them, sometimes driving when Holy Madness rode the Cardinal's horse, sometimes riding inside the coach while the Cardinal chose to be in the saddle. Both Wooshin and the Nomad treated the disgraced monk with courtesy, but he had as little intercourse as possible with Brownpony or his clerical companion.

One morning when they had been three days on the road, Wooshin said to him, "You hide from Cardinal. Why you shun? You know he saved you neck back there. Abbot wring like a chicken, except Cardinal save you. Why you afraid him?"

Blacktooth began to deny it, but heard an inner cock's crow. Wooshin was right. To him, Brownpony represented the authority of the Church, previously wielded by Dom Jarad, and he was tired of the obedience which he had been forced to swear again to save himself. But it was necessary to separate the office from the man. After Wooshin's remarks, he stopped

shrinking from his rescuer, and exchanged polite greetings in the mornings. But the Cardinal, sensing his discomfort, for the most part ignored his presence during much of the journey.

Sometimes Wooshin and the Nomad wrestled or fought for sport with staves. The Nomad called him *Axe*, which no one at the Abbey had dared to do, and Wooshin seemed not to object to the nickname, as long as it was not prefixed by "Brother." In spite of his age and apparent frailty the *Axe* was the inevitable winner of these bouts by firelight, and made the Nomad appear so clumsy that Blacktooth once accepted an offer to try fencing the driver with staves. The driver not-so-clumsily whacked him six times and left him sitting in hot ashes while Wooshin and the Cardinal laughed.

"Let Wooshin teach you," said Brownpony. "In Valana, you may need to defend yourself. You've lived in a cloister, and you're soft. In turn, you help him work on his Rockymount accent."

Blacktooth protested politely, but the Cardinal was insistent. So the fencing and language lessons began. "You ready die now?" the Brother *Axe* asked cheerfully at the beginning of each session, as if he had always asked it of his customers. Afterward, they talked a lot in Rockymount.

But it was with Holy (Little Bear) Madness, the driver, that Blacktooth felt most comfortable, reckoning him to be a servant of no rank or status, and the two struck up an acquaintance. His name in Nomadic was Chūr (Ösle) Høngan, and he called Blacktooth "Nimmy," which in Nomadic approximated the word *kid*, meaning one who had not yet endured the rites of passage into manhood. Blacktooth was scarcely younger than Holy Madness, but he did not take offense. It's true, he thought; I am a thirty-five-year-old teenager. So the Abbot had reminded him. As far as experience in the world was concerned, he might as well have been in prison since childhood. But frightened of an unknowable future, he was already homesick for that prison.

Life at the monastery had not really been equal parts prayer, hard labor, and groveling, as he had told himself. He had done things there he loved to do. He loved the formal prayer of the Church. He sang well, and while he tried to merge his voice in that of the choir, his was the clear tenor that defined itself by its absence when the choir divided into two groups singing the ancient psalms in a dialogue of verse and response. The group without Blacktooth missed him. And on three occasions when there were

important guests at the Abbey, Blacktooth, at the Abbot's request, had sung alone for everyone — once in the church and twice at supper. In the refectory, he had sung Nomad songs with his own embellishments affiliated to childhood memories. He refused to take pride in this, but his satan took it anyway. While at the Abbey, he had made a stringed instrument much like the one his father had given him. He hedged its Nomad origin by naming it after King David's chitara, but pronouncing it "g'tara." It was among the few belongings he had brought with him, and he strummed it a little during the trip, when Brownpony was away on his horse. He was averse to doing anything which might make him seem ridiculous to Brownpony, and he wondered about this aversion.

Some of the territory claimed by right of conquest as part of the Texark Province was not well defined, and the ill-defined area between the sources of the Bay Ghost and Nady Ann Rivers and the mountains to the west was a kind of no-man's-land, where low intensity warfare persisted at times among poor fugitive tribes of the Grasshopper who had refused to take up farming, nomadic outlaws, also mostly Grasshopper refugees, and Texark cavalry sometimes joined by Wilddog war parties in pursuit of raiders. The Cardinal's party carefully skirted the western edge of this area, for Brownpony claimed without much explanation that the mountains, especially the moist and fertile Suckamint Range, were well defended by exiles from the east, of non-Nomadic origin. It was also true that Nomads were superstitious about mountains and stayed away from their heights. The trail led through the foothills, and the nights were cold. But there was much more life here than on the surrounding desert. From occasional horse apple trees and scrub oak, the flora began proliferating and growing taller. Devoid of foliage at present, cottonwood, willow, and catalpa bean trees flourished adjacent to creekbeds, while high upon the snowy mountainsides one could make out the trunks of mighty snow-clad conifers. There were a number of streams to ford, some flowing eastward, trickles of water edged by ice, and some were mere dry washes that would flow only during a flash flood in the foothills. The spring thaw had barely begun. All but the largest creeks would evaporate in the dry land to the east, where a small child could wade through a year's rainfall without wetting its knees.

As they gained altitude on their northward journey, it began to snow lightly. The Nomad took the stallion and began exploring side trails. Before evening, he returned with news of some abandoned buildings less than an hour from the main road. So they turned off the Papal highway and drove a few miles along a rough trail until they came to a rickety village. Several spotted children and a dog with two tails fled to their homes. Brownpony looked questions at Chūr Høngan, who said, "There was nobody here when I was here a while ago."

"They were hiding from an obvious Nomad," the Red Deacon said smiling.

But then a woman with one large blue eye and one small red eye came out of a hut to meet them with a pike and bared teeth. A hunchback with a musket limped rapidly after her. Blacktooth knew that the Cardinal had a pistol well hidden in the upholstery, but he let it alone. He looked around at half a dozen sickly looking people.

"*Gennies!*" gasped Father e'Laiden, who had just awakened from a snooze in the carriage. There was no contempt in his voice, but it was the wrong word to utter at the moment.

This was obviously a small colony of genetically handicapped, gennies, fugitives from the overpopulated Valley of the Misborn, which was now called the Watchitah Nation since its boundaries were fixed by treaty. There were pockets of such fugitives throughout the land, and they were usually at defensive war with all strangers. The hunchback lifted his musket and aimed first at Chūr Høngan, who was driving, then at Blacktooth.

"Both of you get down. And the others inside, get out!" The woman's voice dog-whined the Valley version of the Ol'zark dialect, confirming their origins. She was as dangerous as a whipped cur, Blacktooth sensed. He could smell the fear.

Everyone obeyed except the Axe, who was freshly missing. The executioner had been riding Brownpony's horse only moments before. At the woman's call, a blond young girl came and searched them for weapons. She was lovely and golden, with no apparent defects, and Blacktooth blushed as her soft hands patted his body. She noticed his blush, grinned in his face, pushed close, seized and squeezed his member, then darted away with his rosary. The woman angrily called her back, but the girl was

gone long enough to have hidden his beads. Blacktooth was almost certain the girl was a spook, that is, a Valley-born genny who passes for normal.

He remembered stories he had heard of ogres, perverts, homicidal maniacs among the gennies. Some of the stories were filthy jokes, and most of them were told by bigots. But, having heard the stories, he could feel the shame from them, but not forget in the face of these menacing figures that one or another of these stories came true from time to time. Anything was possible.

Brownpony stirred at last, stepped down from the carriage, and with some majesty put on his red cap. He said to them: "We are churchmen from Valana, my children. We have no weapons. We seek refuge from the weather, and we shall pay you well for shelter and a cooking fire."

The old woman seemed not to hear him. "Get all their belongings, from inside and on top," the woman told the girl in the same tone.

The Cardinal turned to the girl. "You know who I am, and I know who you are," he said to her. "I am Elia Brownpony of the Secretariat."

She shook her head.

"You never met me, but you *do* know of me."

"I don't believe you," she said.

"Move!" said the woman.

The girl climbed inside and began throwing out clothing and other belongings, including Blacktooth's *chitarra*, then thrust out her head and asked, "Books?"

"Those too."

Brownpony's concealed pistol would be next, Blacktooth thought, as he wondered why Brownpony insisted that he was known to the girl. He was not self-important, not an egoist who expected to be recognized everywhere. For now the Cardinal shrugged and stopped protesting. Apparently, the girl never found the pistol.

Suddenly a muffled cry came from the direction of the largest hut in the cluster. The deformed woman looked around. An old man with mottled skin and white hair appeared in the doorway. Behind him stood Wooshin with his forearm against the old man's throat. The Axe could almost make himself invisible. Having circled the village and approached from the rear, he held up his short sword for their edification. Evidently

this was the chief of the village, for the woman and the hunchback immediately dropped their weapons.

"You must not rob them, Linura," old man scolded. "It's one thing to take their weapons, but — " He broke off as Wooshin shook him and brandished the sword.

The woman fell to her knees. The girl ran. She came back with a pitchfork, darted behind Brownpony, and pressed the tines against his back. "My father for your priest," she yelled to the headsman.

"Put your knife away, Wooshin!" Brownpony called, and turned to face the girl. She jabbed him lightly in the stomach and bared her gritted teeth in warning.

"Are you not the Pope's children?" asked the Cardinal, using the ancient euphemism for the misborn. He turned about, his arms spread wide, facing each of them. "Would you harm the servants of Christ and your Pope?"

"For shame, Linura, for shame, Ædrea!" hooted the old man. "You will get us all killed or driven back to the Watchitah by acting this way." Then to the girl: "Ædrea, put that away. Also take care of their horses, then fetch us some beer. Now!"

The older woman lowered her head. "I only meant to search their baggage for arms."

"Put your knife away, 'Shin," the Cardinal said again.

"I want my rosary and my g'tara back," said Blacktooth to the girl, who ignored him.

The old man advanced to kiss the Red Deacon's ring, found none, and kissed his hand instead. "I am called Shard. That is our family's name. You will be welcome to stay in my house until the snow stops. We have not much to eat just now after the winter, but Ædrea can perhaps kill a deer." He turned to the old woman with his arm raised as if to cuff her. She gave the musket to the girl and hurried away.

"We carry corn, beans, and monks' cheese," said Brownpony. "We'll share with you. Tomorrow is Ash Wednesday, so we'll need no meat. Two of us can sleep in the carriage. We have tarpaulins to protect it from the cold wind. We thank you, and pray the weather lets us leave soon."

"Please forgive the rude welcome," said the mottled man. "We are often visited by small bands of Nomads, drunks, or outlaws. Most of them

are superstitious, and fear the flag." He pointed to the yellow and green banner that flew from the gable of his home. It bore the papal keys, and a ring of seven hands. As a warning of papal protection, it had become the flag of the Watchitah Nation. "Even those who don't fear it soon see we have nothing of value, except a girl, and leave us in peace, but my sister trusts no one. But three days ago, we were visited by Texark agents posing as priests. We knew they were sent to spy on us, so we have been very suspicious."

"What happened?"

"They wanted to know how many of us lived in these hills. I told them just one other family a quarter hour walk up the trail. I advised them not to go back there, that the bear boy was dangerous, but they insisted. Only two of them came back an hour later, and they were in a hurry to leave."

"Do you really think the Hannegan would chase Valley runaways this far outside the empire?"

"We know it. Others have been killed closer to the province. Filpeo Harq exploits people's hatred for gennies, and calls us criminals because we fought our way out of the Valley. Some of his guards were killed."

While they were unhitching the horses, Blacktooth noticed two cows with shaggy coats in a pen next to the barn. They were not ordinary farm animals, and appeared to be Nomad cattle. But Nomad cows would have kicked and butted their way out through the boards of the fence by now, so he decided they must be hybrids. Or genny animals, like their genny owners. For that matter, the Nomad cattle probably descended from a few successful freaks. Sometimes, rarely, an apparent monster, whether man or beast, proved to have superior survival value.

The gennies' hospitality improved sharply after the bad beginning. Apparently not of Shard's family, the hunchback had disappeared. Soon Ædrea had killed a fawn, and upon entering the house, she brought a cup of its blood into the house and presented it to Chür Høngan, who looked at it in frozen silence.

The Cardinal was turning red as he choked back laughter. When the Nomad looked at him, Brownpony hid his mouth. Høngan snorted at him and took the deer blood from the girl. Growling at her, he frowned mightily and downed it at a gulp. The girl stepped back as if in awe. The

Red Deacon's laughter exploded, and after a moment they were all laughing except Ædrea.

"Well, Nomads drink blood, don't they?" she demanded. Blushing at the laughter, she went to dress the fawn.

"Some do," said Holy Madness. "On ceremonial occasions."

After an evening meal of veal-tender venison, black bread, peas, and mugs of cloudy home brew, they talked again, crowding around the fire in Shard's house. Only the Nomad was missing; pretending to speak little Ol'zark, he had taken his blanket roll and gone to bed early in the carriage after losing a drawing of lots for a place in the house. The other loser was Blacktooth, who was glad to sleep away from a headsman, a Cardinal, a crazy priest, and several portents, including a pretty female tease.

The common language among them was Ol'zark, but when Shard asked the oriental a question, Wooshin replied in broken Churchspeak. After this had happened three times, Brownpony turned to him and said, "Wooshin, speak the language of our hosts. That language is Ol'zark Valleyspeak of the Watchitah Nation."

The Axe bristled and stared at Brownpony, who gazed at him evenly. "Valleyspeak is the language of our hosts," he repeated.

Wooshin looked down at the floor. The room was dead silent. He looked up, then, and said in flawless Texark, "Good Simpleton, the answer to your question is that by profession I was a seaman and a warrior. But in my later years I cut off heads for the mayor of Texark."

"And how did you sink to that, Ser?" asked a thin voice from Ædrea.

Wooshin looked at her without anger.

"Not sink, not rise," he said in bad Churchspeak, then returning to her tongue: "Death is the way of the warrior, girl. There is no honor in it, nor any dishonor, if one is just being oneself."

"But to do it for the Hannegan?"

Wooshin's normal expression was relaxed, alert, about-to-smile, wrinkled about the eyes, humorous, scrutinizing. But now it was as frozen as a corpse. Facing Ædrea, he arose slowly and bowed to her. Blacktooth felt his scalp crawl.

Then the Axe looked at the Red Deacon as if to say, "See what you made me do!" and went to take a walk in the night. It was the last time the old manslayer ever resisted speaking Ol'zark, but Blacktooth noticed

that when he did speak it, he always imitated Shard's accent, and he called it Valleyspeak. He treated Ædrea with extreme courtesy during their stay. There was no mistaking the bitterness of his regret, but regret for what? Blacktooth was unsure.



AFTER TWO DAYS of intermittent light snow, they stayed at Arch Hollow, as the Shards called it, for six days, while Chūr Høngan spent most of his time riding out to investigate the conditions along the trail.

Wooshin too was gone most of the time, but made no account of his activities, unless to the Cardinal in secret. It seemed best to wait until other passing traffic began to shovel its way along in the near vicinity.

On the second night, they sat around the fire in the center of Shard's lodge. Brownpony tried to elicit the family's story without asking too many questions. His skill in conversation soon led Shard into recounting his family's adventures since the famine and the exodus. There had been a mass escape attempt ten years ago. At least two hundred were hunted down and killed by Texark troops as they fled through forests and up stream beds across the crest of the ridge. At least twice as many escaped the troops that were there both to protect the Watchitah people against intruders and to prevent the escape of the gennies. The Valley was more than a valley, it was a small nation which had kept the name of its place of origin until the conquest. No one had counted the population, but Shard called it a quarter of a million, causing Brownpony to raise an eyebrow. Fifty thousand was closer to popular consensus.

"The approaches to the Watchitah are well guarded by the Hannegan, but the patrols could not catch so many at one time," said Shard. "Probably half of the dead were killed by Texark troops and the others lynched by farmers. Ædrea, of course, could have escaped by passing for normal, becoming a 'spook.' My daughter is very brave to remain with us. The spooks among us are the ones most hated and feared. They can marry unsuspecting normals and pass on the curse, give birth to monsters."

"How safe are you here from the natives?" Brownpony wondered. "I think of this as outlaw country."

"It was, and is, to some extent. The nearest town is two days away. They know we're here. The priest visits us every month, except in winter.

He and the baron govern the town. There has been no trouble. Only 'Drea goes to town. Of course she wears the green headband. We're south of the Denver Republic, but the Church is respected here more than in the Empire. The Papal Highway is patrolled, of course. Still, there are occasional outlaws, but they are looking for traveling merchants. We have nothing here to invite robbery."

"Are there more of you living near here?"

"You saw the hunchback, Cortus. His family lives next door. But the only family behind us is the one with the bear boy."

"Shard, I am the Secretary for Extraordinary Ecclesiastical Concerns."

The old man looked at him with suspicion. "If you really are, then you don't need to ask such a question."

The monk could feel a tension bordering on hostility in the room, but it passed in silence. It seemed clear Shard was lying about the presence of other gennies in the region.

After the dishes had been washed outside in the snow, Linura entered and sat beside, but a little behind, her brother. Then Ædrea came in and dropped cross-legged on the floor beside Blacktooth, who stirred restlessly and almost stopped listening. He wanted his rosary back. Her girl-smell teased his nostrils. Her knees were shiny by firelight. When she noticed his gaze, she pulled a blanket over her lap, but smiled briefly into his eyes before attending the conversation again. Remembering that this coy creature had grabbed his penis at their first encounter, he nudged her.

"Rosary back," he whispered fiercely.

She giggled and nudged back, hard.

"I've often wondered about life in the Valley," the Red Deacon was saying.

"There is more death than life there, m'Lord Cardinal," Shard answered. "Few who live there want to risk giving birth. Normal birth is rare. Most die. Others are too feeble to want life. If it were not for the influx, the Watchitah would soon be empty."

"Influx? From where?"

"You must know, m'Lord."

Brownpony nodded. Many people in families of registered pedigree

nonetheless had accursed offspring. Lest they lose their registration with the keepers of such records, families without fear of the Church killed their malformed babies. But often there were children whose deformities could be concealed for a time, and these were sent to the Valley at a later age by the pious. Monks and nuns often brought them. People who lived near the Watchitah hated and feared the inhabitants, especially the near-normal among them. Blacktooth noticed that everyone was glancing at Ædrea.

"Forgive me, daughter," Brownpony murmured when she met his eyes.

"I don't like admitting it," Shard was saying, "but the patrols who guard the passes were as much our protectors as our jailers. But they did nothing to help us when famine came."

"And the Church?" said the Red Deacon. "Too busy with its own schism to be of much help to anyone."

"Well, of course we were cut off from papal protection, but the Archbishop of Texark did send in some supplies. I think he is not a cruel man, perhaps only powerless."

"You cannot imagine how powerless is Cardinal Archbishop Benefez," Father e'Laiden sighed.

Blacktooth glanced quickly at the priest, certain that he was being sardonic and meant the opposite of what he said. Benefez had behind him the power of the Hannegans. And e'Laiden spoke Texark like a native, which he probably was, although his command of Wilddog Nomadic meant he had lived long on the High Plains.

"My rosary!" Blacktooth whispered angrily.

She winked at him and grinned. "I hid it in the barn. You can have it tomorrow."

The way she looked at him brought on a eruption of horniness and he felt his face turning red. Blacktooth feared her. Many deformities recurred, and many were genetically connected. Various writers had made lists. There was one mutation in which great physical beauty was coupled with a defect in the brain, the most notable symptom of which was the onset of criminal insanity a few years after puberty. He stole a glance at her, but she caught him at it, and clicked her tongue and smirked. She might not be crazy, but she was a she-devil. He wanted to go to the carriage and to

bed, but he was ashamed to stand up at the moment. At last he prayed his erection away and mumbled good night to the others. Ædrea followed him outside, but he fled into the latrine, then climbed out the back window. He was immediately seized by the hunchback and another creature and dragged away toward another house with a lighted doorway. Nearly fainting with fright, he heard the hunchback whisper hoarsely that someone needed absolution.

"But I am not a priest!" he protested. In vain. They dragged him into the house of Shard's neighbor.

The hunchback and his companion released Blacktooth after pushing him inside, and they stood blocking the door. The monk could only sit down on a stool pointed out to him, and from there await developments. There was firelight and a lantern. There was a wrinkled old man with a scraggly beard in the room, who said his name was Tempus. He pointed out the others. There was his wife, Irene, whose face was a permanent scar. There were Ululata, and Pustria, females both of portentous mien. The hunchback was called Cortus, and his companion Barlo. They were all siblings or cousins or half-siblings. Barlo had a terrible itch, especially in the genital area. Tempus shouted at him to stop masturbating, but the words had no effect on the creature.

God in his wisdom had given Ululata a deformed foot, although he had in all other ways given her the proportions of the divine image in His mind of God in mercy. But the foot was not something you would want to walk with. "God is thus," said the father.

The father had given her crutches. To him, God had given seven fingers, which he displayed to the monk, a third useless eye, and four testicles with two healthy penes, all of which he exhibited. Pustria was Ululata's half-sister, according to their faithful mother's best memory of their conceptions under the weight of the same sire. Pustria was deformed only by blindness, and Mother Irene was partial to Pustria because Pustria could not see her mother's face, a mask of scab of which Mother Irene was not proud. "God is thus, since the deluge of fire and ice," said the father.

Barlo was in need of absolution, Tempus explained, in order to make him stop masturbating. Blacktooth explained that he could not absolve anybody, and that absolution would not have the effect that Tempus

desired. Tempus was adamant. Blacktooth would not be allowed to leave until he performed.


"Will you let me go then, immediately?" he demanded.

Tempus nodded gravely and crossed his heart. Nimmy closed his eyes for a moment and tried to summon a little Latin.

"Labores semper tecum," he said in the softest voice he could muster. "Igni etiam aqua interdictus tu. Semper super capitem tuum feces descendant avium."

"Amen," Tempus said in echo to this malediction.

Nimmy got up and left. At the moment, he was not particularly ashamed of wishing eternal suffering on the man, of pronouncing a dire sentence of exile, and calling down upon the head of Barlo a perpetual rain of birdshit; the glep who was still scratching his crotch followed him at a distance.

 **HÜR HÖNGAN** was already asleep. Not more than three of them could spend the night in Shard's house without forcing the old man to move out. Rank had determined that Brownpony would sleep in comfort, and for his age e'Laiden was favored. Blacktooth had drawn lots with Wooshin and lost the third place indoors. He was relieved things had turned out so, especially after his escape from the clutches of the hunchback's family. If he must sleep in the cold carriage, he preferred to sleep with the Nomad. Although, during his waking hours, he had lost his fear of the killer of hundreds, the Brother Axe still haunted his dreams. Sometimes he dreamed he himself was the executioner, chopping heads for Hannegan with a mighty sword, but that night in the carriage, he dreamed he was Pontius Pilate, and Wooshin the headsman stood beside him as Marcus the Centurion, confronted by a pretender to the Kingdom of God among the Nomads.

Kings of the Nomads were common in those days. He crucified not one but four of them during his lucrative career in south Texas-Judea. The first case was the hardest for him, and sad; Blacktooth-Pilate was like a boy killing his first deer. Because the pretender was harmless, the case was jinxed by the scruples of his wife. He had wanted to set the first one free. It was easier to kill the ones that followed, and certainly necessary to show

that kings were made by Texark and not by tribal gods. He always asked them the same question. The first one could not or would not answer, and merely stood looking at him. The second to be crucified was more talkative.

"What is truth?" asked Blacktooth.

"Truth is the essence of all true statements," said the second King of the Nomads. "Falsehood is the essence of all false statements. Without saying anything, there is neither true nor false. I offer Your Majesty my silence."

"Crucify him," said Pilate, "with prejudice. And get it right this time. Wrap his arms and legs around the cross. That's the way it shows in the Texark Procurators' Handbook. Of course, that's not enough for you new recruits these days. You have to know why. Well, I'll tell you why, this time. It's sound engineering principle that suggests it, and sound engineering principle is the Texark way. We build well, we govern well. We're Texarkans. Do the troops read Vergil Marcus? No? Well.

"Nailing the hands to the back of the cross is sound engineering principle and sound governmental policy because when you nail the hands in front the weight of the body hangs on the nails, they tear, unless you also nail the forearm; but when you wrap the arms across the top of the cross and nail them from behind, the weight of the body hangs from the arm on the crossbar, and the nail does nothing but keep the arm in place. That way, you can smash his bones better when it's time to go home from work. Do it the Texark way, men; the Texark way is the eternal way. Let's carry out the sentence with some snap this time."

"Hail to the Hannegan!" said Marcus the Axe.

"Hail Texark! Next case."

Pontius felt better after that. Half awake by now, he knew he was dreaming, but let the dream go on. The fellow's silly explanation of truth probably had nothing to do with the silence of the first King of the Nomads, but it noisily invoked silence as policy and thus took some of the sting out of Pilate's remembrance of the first one's half smiling gaze, which had seemed to say to him at the time nothing philosophical at all but had expressed an utterly intimate, infinite regress of "I who look at you who look at me who look at you..." His wife Ædrea had been frightened by the same look. It was perhaps sexy, and for that very reason insulting to those whose duty it was to see such scum as loathsome.

"What is truth?" said Pilate to the third King of the Nomads.

"Root for pearls, Texark pig!"

Blacktooth-Pilate had no qualms at all with that one.

He woke up thinking about Ædrea instead — and their coming assignation in a hayloft. A prank. Drowsily, he remembered hearing Brother Gimpus argue that a detachment from sexual passion was the essence of chastity, and that detachment was possible without abstinence. Brother Gimpus was caught naked with an ugly widow in the village who claimed she paid him every Wednesday for the eighth sacrament. "Rest in peace," Blacktooth whispered against the pillow.

Chūr Høngan was still asleep when Blacktooth started up, fully awakened by hoof beats, which stopped near the carriage. Then he heard voices speaking softly in Grasshopper. They were talking about Shard's cows in the pen next to the barn, until something excited them and there was another burst of hoof beats, followed by the screams of Ædrea. The monk pulled at the edge of the tarp and peered outside. A few flakes of snow were still falling in the faint morning light. There were three horsemen, obviously Nomads. Two of them held the kicking girl suspended by her arms between them. Shard began yelling protests from afar, and the hunchback ran out with his musket. Blacktooth turned to awaken Høngan, but he was already up and moving, putting on his wolfskins and the leather helmet with small horns and a metal ornament. He usually wore the hat only when mounted. Blacktooth thrust his hand deep into the upholstery and felt the Red Deacon's handgun. The girl had missed it.

Chūr Høngan climbed out the other door and came into their view from behind the coach, yelling at the renegades in the Wilddog of the High Plains.

"In the name of the Wilddog Sharf and his mother, put her down! I command you, motherless ones! Dismount!"

Blacktooth raised the Cardinal's weapon, but his hand was shaking badly. The Nomad not involved with the girl lifted his musket, looked closely at Holy Madness, then dropped the weapon to the ground. The others eased the girl onto her feet, and she promptly ran away. The riders slowly dismounted, and the apparent leader fell to his knees before the advancing Høngan.

He spoke now in Høngan's dialect. "Oh Little Bear's kin, Sire of the Day Maiden, we meant her no harm. We saw those cows over there and thought they were ours. We were only teasing the girl."

"Only a teasing little rape, perhaps? Apologize and leave here at once. You know those tame cows are not yours. You are motherless. You ride unbranded horses. I heard you speaking Grasshopper, so you don't belong anywhere near here. Never bother these people; they are children of the Pope, with whom the free Hordes have treaties."

The visitors complied immediately and were gone. The incident had lasted not more than five minutes, but Blacktooth was astounded. He climbed out of the carriage. Chūr Ōsle Høngan leaned against the coach and gazed absently after them as they rode away toward the main trail through a sprinkle of snow.

"They're Grasshopper outlaws, but they knew you! Who *are* you?" Blacktooth asked in awe.

The Nomad smiled at him. "You know my name."

"What was that they called you?"

"Sire of the Day Maiden'? Have you never heard that before?"

"Of course. It's what one calls one's sharf."

"Or even one's own uncle on some occasions."

"But motherless ones recognized you? Last night I dreamed of a king of the Nomads."

Høngan laughed. "I'm no king, Nimmy. Not yet. It's not me they recognized. Just this." He touched the metal ornament on the front of his helmet. "The clan of my mother." He smiled at Blacktooth. "Nimmy, my name is 'Holy Madness,' of the Little Bear Motherline. Pronounce it in Jackrabbit."

"Cheer Honnyugan. But in Jackrabbit, it means Magic Madman."

"Just the last name. What does it sound like?"

"Honnyugan? *Hannegan*?"

"Just so. We're cousins," archly said the Nomad. "Don't tell anybody, and don't ever pronounce it in Jackrabbit again."

Cardinal Brownpony was approaching from the direction of Shard's house, and Chūr Høngan went to meet him with a report of the incident. Blacktooth wondered if the Nomad was entirely teasing him. He had heard claims of the dynasty's ultimate Nomadic origin, but since Boedullus

made no mention of it, that origin must have been in recent centuries. At least he knew now that Høngan was of a powerful motherline. His own family, displaced to the farms, had no insignia, and he had never studied the heraldry of the Plains. Something else that piqued his curiosity about the Nomad was his apparent close friendship with Father e'Laiden, who called him Bear Cub. The priest had often ridden beside the Nomad when he was driving, and their talks were plainly personal but private. They had known each other well on the Plains. From fragments overheard, he decided that e'Laiden was formerly the Nomad's teacher, but no longer dared to play that role unasked, lest a grown-up and somewhat wicked student laugh in his face.

Blacktooth went to look for his rosary and g'tara in the barn, which was half buried in the side of a hill. Ædrea was not visible, but he could hear the muffled sound of strings being plucked. The floor was swept stone, and a small stream of spring water ran in a channel from beneath a closed door in the rear and out to the cattle pen outside the wall. Above the door was a hayloft. He opened the door and found himself in a root cellar, with a number of nearly empty bins containing some withered turnips, a pumpkin, and a few sprouting potatoes: the remains of last year's crops. And there were jars of preserved fruits — where could they have grown? — on the shelves. There were three barrels, some farm implements, and a pile of straw for layering vegetables. There was no one here. He turned to go, but Ædrea slipped down from the hayloft and confronted him as he started to leave. Nimmy looked at her and backed away. In spite of the weather, she was wearing nothing but a short leather skirt, a bright grin, and his rosary as a necklace.

He backed away. "Wh-where's the g'tara?"

"In the loft. It's more comfortable up there. You can snuggle down in the hay. Come on."

"The air's warmer in here than outside."

"All right." She came in and closed the door behind her, leaving them in pitch darkness.

"Haven't you a lamp or candle?"

She laughed, and he felt her hands exploring him. "Can't you see in the dark? I can."

"No. Please. How can you?"

Her hands withdrew. "How can I what?"

"See in the dark."

"I'm a genny, you know. Some of us can do that. It's not really seeing, though. I just know where I am. But I can see the halo around you. You're one of us."

"Us who?"

"You're a genny with a halo."

"I'm not —" He broke off, hearing her rustling skirt in the darkness, then the scratch of flint on steel and a spark. After several sparks, she managed to kindle a bit of tinder and used it to light a tallow taper. Nimmy relaxed slightly. She took down two clay cups from a shelf and turned the spigot on one of the barrels.

"Let's drink a glass of berry wine."

"I'm not really thirsty."

"It's not for thirst, silly. It's for getting drunk."

"I'm not supposed to do that."

She handed him the cup and sat down in the straw.

"My g'tara —"

"Oh, all right. Wait here. I'll get it."

He nervously gulped the wine while she was gone. It was strong, sweet, tasted of resin and was immediately relaxing. She came back in with his g'tara, but held it away when he reached for it.

"You have to play it for me."

He sighed. "All right. Just once. What shall I play?"

"Pour Me Another Before We Do It Brother."

Nimmy poured another cup of wine and handed it to her.

"That's the name of the song, silly."

"I don't know it."

"Well, play anything." She flopped down in the straw. Her skirt came up. By candlelight he could see under it. She wasn't wearing anything there. But something was unusual. He hadn't seen a girl that way since he was a child, but it wasn't the way he remembered. He looked at her, the g'tara, the cup of wine in his hand, and the candle. He gulped the wine, and poured another.

"Play a love song."

He gulped again, set the cup aside, and began plucking the strings. He

didn't know any love songs, so he began singing the opening lines of Vergil's fourth eclogue to music he had composed himself. When he got to the words *jam redit et Virgo*, she made a little puff of wind with her lips and blew out the candle from six feet away. He stopped in fright.

"Pour another cup of wine and come here."

Nimmy heard the liquid splashing into the cup, then realized he was doing it himself.

"You drink it," she said.

"How do I get out of here?"

"Well, you have to find the keyhole. It's not very big."

He fumbled in the area of the door.

"It's over here."

He felt her tugging at his sleeve, gulped the wine before he spilled it, and sprawled beside her in the darkness. "Where's the key?"

"Right here." She grabbed what she had grabbed when first they met. He didn't feel like resisting. They came together, but after a lot of fumbling, he said, "It won't fit!"

"I know. The surgeon fixed me so it won't, but it's fun anyway, isn't it?"

"Not much."

She sobbed. "You don't like me!"

"Yes I do, but it won't fit."

"That's all right," she sniffled, sliding lower in the straw. "Just come here."

Drunkenly, he feared at any moment Cardinal Brownpony would burst out of the broom closet and yell, "Aha! Caught you!" But nothing like that happened.

When he stumbled out of the barn with his virginity diminished, a smiling *Ædrea* (*semper virgo*) sat twirling his rosary, watched him from the hayloft until he crawled into the carriage and pulled down the tarp behind him. The term "against nature" insinuated itself into his tipsy consciousness. He had never been so drunk.

"Damn that witch!" he whispered when he awoke, but recoiled from the words at once. *I am my own witch!* quickly replaced them. Help me, Saint Isaac Edward Leibowitz. My Patron, I looked forward to entering that barn — pray for me. I was glad she stole my things. It gave me the

excuse I needed to pursue her in pretended anger. The things she stole, I should have given her. I know this now. Why couldn't I have known it then? O Saint Leibowitz, intercede for me.

BLACKTOOTH HAD FALLEN angrily in love. His sexuality had always been a mystery to him. His erotic dreams had more often involved enormous buttocks than enormous breasts, but now he was suddenly smitten by a girl, and there was no doubt at all in his mind that it was the most powerful love he had ever felt except his love for the heart of the Virgin, a blasphemous comparison, but true. Or was that lust too?

In spite of their tryst in the root-cellar, during the days that followed Ædrea responded to his enamored gaze with a self-satisfied smirk and a shake of her pretty head. He knew what she meant. She, as a bearer of the curse, was forbidden to fornicate with anyone outside the Valley. The penalty was mutilation or death. She had taken an awful chance in seducing him. But what they had done in the barn was only passionate play, not against the basic folklaw. Against his fractured vows, surely. She knew that. At the end, she teased him about how easily she overcame his vows. He knew he was still bound by the vows, and straying once was no excuse for straying again. But without more surgery, Ædrea was physically incapable of normal coitus. Her father had it done to her when she was a child, probably afraid that someone like Cortus or Barlo would rape her. O Holy Mother, pity us.

No one had seen them in the barn, but the pulsation of sexuality that happened whenever the girl and the monk came together did not escape the Cardinal's attention. The Red Deacon caught him alone while Blacktooth was behind the coach lashing bundles in preparation for departure.

"It's time we talk, Nimmy. Excuse me, Blacktooth. I hear Høngan calling you Nimmy, and it seems to fit. How do you want to be called?"

Blacktooth shrugged. "I'm leaving an old life behind. I might as well leave my name behind. I don't mind."

"All right, Brother Nimmy. Just don't leave behind your promise of obedience. I remind you that Ædrea is a genny. Watch your step very closely here. I'll tell you, Shard's was not the first exodus here from the

valley. It's been happening for years. This place is more than it seems, and Ædrea is more than she seems."

"I had begun to suspect, m'Lord."

"You are not to intentionally see her again. If you ever see her again in Valana, avoid her." He commanded Blacktooth with his eyes. "This has nothing to do with your vow of chastity, but let this help you keep it. They are hiding a large genny colony back there in the higher hills, but don't let them know that you know. They're frightened enough of us to be dangerous."

"Yes."

"And there's something else, Nimmy. Chūr Ösle Høngan is an important man among his people, as you found out from those outlaws, but you were not supposed to know, and it is not known in Valana. Now I have to ask for your silence. There is a need for secrecy. He is an envoy to me from the Plains, but you must not tell that to anyone. He is just a driver I hired."

"I understand, m'Lord."

"Father e'Laiden is another matter. I had no need to read your mind to see your curiosity about him. About him, you must also say nothing. He grew his beard for this trip, to avoid recognition. I picked him up forty miles south of Valana, and will let him off at the same place, which will make you even more curious. Not even my friend Dom Jarad knows who he is. I've told travelers he's just a passenger to whom I gave a ride. You know I introduced him to Dom Jarad as my temporary secretary. No more of that. You will not mention him to anyone. If you meet him in Valana later without his beard, do not allow yourself to recognize him. His name is not e'Laiden, anyway. About these two men, you will be absolutely silent."

"I have had much practice at being silent, m'Lord."

"Yes, well, I took a big chance with you, Blacktooth. Nimmy. For now, your job is just to keep your mouth shut. I may find other uses for you in Valana."

"That would please me, m'Lord. I have felt useless for years."

Brownpony turned to look at him closely. "I am surprised to hear it. Your Abbot told me you are quite religious, and seemed called to contemplation. Do you think that useless?"

"Not at all, but it's my turn to be surprised the Abbot said I was called to it. He was very angry with me."

"Well, of course he was angry, partly at himself. Nimmy, he's sorry he made you do that silly Duren translation. He thought it would be useful."

"I told him otherwise."

"I know. He thought you were ducking hard work. Now, he blames himself for your revolt. He's a good man, and he's really sorry the Order lost you. I know how humiliating it was for you at the end, but forgive him if you can."

"I do, but he didn't forgive me. I wasn't even allowed to confess."

"Not allowed by whom, Dom Jarad?"

"The Prior said he would ask the Abbot. I suppose he did."

"Nobody shrived you, eh? Well, Father e'Laiden can confess you if you can't wait until we get to Valana. I can imagine you need it by now."

Blacktooth blushed, wondering if the remark implied a reference to Ædrea. Of course it did!

He approached the old whitebeard priest later that day, but the cleric shook his head. "His Eminence forgets something. I'm not even supposed to say mass. You have seen me do it, but I don't give the Eucharist, and I don't do confessions. Saying a private mass is my own sin, if it is one — not involving others."

A wild and sorrowful look came over the old man's face, as if he were at war within himself. Blacktooth had seen the look before and shivered. Father e'Laiden was just a little crazy.

Strange traveling companions, he thought. A priest under interdict, a seaman-headsman-warrior, a wild but aristocratic Nomad, a disgraced monk, and a Cardinal who was not more than a deacon. Brownpony, Blacktooth, and Høngan were all of Nomadic extraction, and e'Laiden obviously had lived among Nomads. Holy Madness, whose mother's family was called Little Bear, and e'Laiden seemed old friends, and often talked of Nomad families known to both of them. Only the executioner was unrelated to the people of the Plains. Blacktooth was more puzzled than ever about the Red Deacon's intentions. The Cardinal, he had learned, was head of the Secretariat of Extraordinary Ecclesiastical Con-

cerns, an obscure and minor office of the Curia which he had heard someone call "the bureau of trivial intrigues."

After two days of light snow the skies cleared. There was bright sun and a breeze from the south. Three days later, the thaw was well underway. Chūr Høngan was gone for half a day, then returned with an opinion that the highway was not impassable, although they might have to shovel slushy snow in a few places. Brownpony paid Shard a fair sum in coins from the papal mint, and the travelers took their leave of the village. Only the children, Shard, and Tempus watched them go. The monk's eyes searched in vain for Ædrea. He was sure she was angry because of his mixed feelings and his avoidance of her. He wanted to let her know he blamed only himself, but there was no way. She was gone for good. ☞



*"All I know is that it tasted like a duck.
How it looked, walked, and sounded was irrelevant."*



BOOKS TO LOOK FOR

CHARLES DE LINT

The Great Wheel, by Ian R. MacLeod, Harcourt Brace & Co., 1997, \$24.00

IAN MACLEOD'S debut novel is the quintessential story of a Roman Catholic priest having a crisis of faith after/while being sent to a new parish where the parishioners are indifferent, if not hostile. Temptation in the form of a love interest is often present to magnify the crisis of faith, and there is inevitably some secret or shame in the priest's past that also plays a large role in the plot. Not essential, but sometimes present, is the priest's colonial attitude toward his new parishioners — the idea that if they will only accept God, or in the case of indigenous peoples, God and the wonders of Western civilization, all their problems will be solved.

All of the above elements can certainly be found in *The Great Wheel*, but that's not necessarily a

negative thing. There are, after all, only so many plots, and MacLeod quickly proves himself to have something new to say about the subject.

The setting is a dystopian version of our world, sometime in the not-too-distant future, that is divided between Europeans (the haves) and Borderers (the have-nots) who appear to be anyone native to a Third World Country. (To all intents and purposes — at least in how their influence is felt — the Far East and the Americas don't seem to exist.) The separation of Europeans and Borderers is heightened by the way that fatal diseases can arise from the most basic physical contact between the two. The Europeans have technological healing systems implanted in them at an early age — based on some sort of nanotechnology, one assumes; the Borderers have nothing of the sort and are often in very poor health, if not suffering the final stages of some fatal disease.

The Borderers are only allowed into European territory to do manual labor; otherwise they are unwelcome, referred to as "Gogs," and barely considered human. In the Borderers' territory, the Europeans live in zones, separated from the general populace, all of which plays very much like the British intrusions into India and Africa. To keep them safe from their contact with the Borderers, the Europeans wear special gloves, their clothes are disinfected daily, and their internal healing systems undergo constant safety checks. Needless to say, the Borderers are left to fend for themselves.

It's into this world that Father John arrives. Already questioning his faith because of a bizarre, self-inflicted incident that left his brother in a permanent coma, he is affected deeply by the abject poverty and disease-ridden living conditions of the Borderers. He becomes physically involved with a Borderer woman, and is determined to do what he can to make life better for his parishioners, most of whom can barely tolerate his presence, little say attend services at his church. When Father John discovers a connection between koiyl (a narcotic leaf chewed by the Borderers) and blood cancer, his subsequent inves-

tigations estrange him still further from the other Europeans, the Church, and his parishioners, and drop him into a downward spiral of addiction and confusion.

MacLeod has done a tremendous job in realizing his near-future setting and the characters with which he has peopled it. *The Great Wheel* isn't a page-turner in the conventional sense. It is, rather, a slow and evocative visit into an alien world that echoes our own as much as it contrasts against it. And I particularly liked the way MacLeod used the Church and its priesthood—not as convenient villainous, or unfeeling, fodder, but as a stepping-stone to an exploration of personal loss and a need to understand one's world, and one's place in it. In his hands, Father John's ordeals take on a universal significance.

The Merchant of Marvels and the Peddler of Dreams, by Frédéric Clément, Chronicle Books, 1997, \$24.95

This isn't so much a story as a delightfully illustrated catalogue of wondrous words and amusing curiosities. The setup is extremely simple: Frederick Knick-Knack is looking for the perfect gift for his

friend Alice. So he offers up a list of what he has in his collection of found and acquired objects, and asks her to choose one. They range from "a tiny dress of nothing at all, tailored, I am sure, from a sheet of rain" and "some fragile fragments of the palace of the King of Snails," to "seven peals of Cinderella's laughter stored with six fine shards of her splendid glass slipper."

The illustrations are charmingly old-fashioned and look as though they might have been taken from some turn-of-the-century mail-order catalogue, except, of course, they depict all these very odd things that Sears, Roebuck and Co. would never have for sale. It's expensive for what it is, to be sure, but perhaps it'll make the perfect gift for that friend of yours who has everything.

The X-Files Book of the Unexplained, Volume II, by Jane Goldman, HarperPrism, 1997, \$29.95

These days, it seems, popularity can turn a movie, a comic book, or a TV show into a commercial juggernaut that reaches far beyond the original boundaries of its source material. We've seen it with *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, *Batman*. Now

Chris Carter's *The X-Files* gets its turn.

We're not going to get into the various novelizations here. But before we do go any further, I have to admit that I'm not a particularly huge fan of the show myself. I don't dislike it, but I don't go out of my way to watch it either because, while I can enjoy the mood it evokes, I get irritated with how often (at least in the few times I've watched it) everything wraps up in the final minute. One moment the characters are on death's door, with no rescue in sight, the next everything's fine.

But with that said, I have been enjoying these books by Jane Goldman. There's a lot of *X-Files* material in them — stills from the show, plot summaries, quotes from various actors, writers, directors and the like. But there is also a lot of fascinating, truly weird material culled from all over the world to be found here as well. Nothing gets a serious, in-depth study, it's true, but the snippets and bits that do show up on everything from dreaming and miracles to urban legends and alien abductions are presented in tasty little "word bites," and Goldman provides a quite extensive bibliography at the end of each book to steer the interested reader

to those works that do deal with the subjects in more depth.

The layout of the books is attractive, with a great deal of visual reference beyond the stills from the show, and Goldman writes with enthusiasm for her subject, refraining from tabloid journalism. For *X-Files* fans, both volumes are a treasure trove of material, but there's more than a few hour's worth of material here for the casual reader as well.

The Encyclopedia of Fantasy, by John Clute and John Grant, St. Martin's Press, 1997, \$75.00

If you remember 1993's *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* by John Clute and Peter Nicholls, then you'll be familiar with the format for this new massive reference book that Clute has put together with his collaborator John Grant. It's a slightly oversize, very fat volume that clocks in at over a thousand pages and appears to contain a remarkably inclusive number of entries on the various practitioners of the fantasy field, ranging from the obscure to most modern readers (James Branch Cabell and de la Motte Fouqué) through to contemporary bestsellers (Terry Goodkind).

How accurate are the entries?

Hard to say. Most of the ones I read seemed correct, but the only one I can vouch for with any veracity is my own and there were a few errors in it: they list a number of pseudonyms that I used for poems (to fill up blank spots in a magazine I edited in the seventies) as the authors of stories; my novel *The Little Country* becomes *The Little People* and some of the details about the novel are incorrect; and *Berlin* was only published in a volume on its own in Canada, not the U.S. But these are picayune errors at best — and likely the result of typos rather than poor research — and while typos do crop up in other entries I read, on the whole the book appears quite accurate.

The listings range from authors and books through to films, directors and pretty much every conceivable area in which fantasy plays a part in the arts. Now if that was all there was to it, I'd hesitate recommending the book to any but the most die-hard fantasy reader. But what makes the book so fascinating, and has already provided me with literally hours of pleasure, are the various essays exploring the tropes and themes of fantasy.

Not being an academic, I have no idea if many of the terms Clute and Grant have come up with here

are part of the lexicon of those who study fantastic literature, but they were certainly new to me, and they have about them the ring of both truth and usefulness. Evocative terms such as "wainscots" (hidden "wainscot" societies such as the Borrowers), "thinning" (the reduction of a healthy land, usually because of some outside agent), "into the woods" (that passage through a dark wood that is so prevalent in fairy tales), and a few dozen others.

Intrigued by one of these headwords, I would sit down to read the essay under it and the next thing I knew, I'd look up to discover that a couple of hours had slipped away while I'd been following a trail of fascinating cross-references through a dozen or so other entries. And happily, at the end of each such essay is a list of examples of various stories and novels one can read as a follow-up to see the terms in action.

Aficionados of the field will find a wealth of material to add to their reading lists here (I know I already have), while writers can gain a deeper appreciation of why certain motifs work so well, why some combine so well, or even which have been done to death.

Seventy-five dollars might seem like a great deal for a book, particularly a reference book. But

it's really only the price of three hardcovers, and frankly, the payback is so good, I can't imagine anyone regretting their purchase of it, once they've spent some time exploring its pages.

Highly recommended.

The Gift, by Patrick O'Leary,
Tor, 1997, \$22.95

The last thing I expected as a sophomore effort from the author of the very contemporary *Door Number Three* was a high fantasy. O'Leary's first novel was so refreshing, so unique, that I was a little surprised, I might even say disappointed, when I cracked open the galley of *The Gift* and realized where he was taking me this time.

I should have had more faith.

Now it's true that O'Leary's not breaking incredibly new ground with his subject matter. At the heart of the book, this is a story that touches on many of the familiar themes of high fantasy: the wounded king, whose recovery will also mean the restoration of his wounded kingdom; the boy of low station (a woodcutter's son, here) who all unknowingly carries the potential of great destiny inside him; the evil overlord who often seems cruel for cruelty's sake; a noble talking eagle;

and any number of hidden magical races, journeys across perilous landscapes, and the like.

What sets *The Gift* above its peers are two things. O'Leary has his own gift with prose; the words flow with the natural lilt and lift of a storyteller's voice of old, of true tales told around a campfire, or in a great hall at the end of the evening, when the feasting is done. And then there's the fascinating story-within-a-story-within-a-story manner in which he has chosen to tell this tale. The latter is particularly effective since part of the thrust of *The Gift* is an exploration of storytelling — its history, what it meant to our ancestors, what it means to us now.

In a telling section, one character remarks to another that the thing that sets us apart from animals is our stories. Until Story was created, we all lived in the present. Story was what captured the past for us and allows us to consider the future. That moment, when the first story was told, was when we — humans — began to change and grow.

Again, like the subject matter, it's perhaps not the most original concept on its own. But combined with the rousing and, yes, thoughtful story O'Leary uses as his vehicle to express it, the natural, unaffected

voice he has assumed here, and the Chinese puzzle-box of stories that unfold the tale, *The Gift* turns out to be just as wonderful a reading experience as was the author's first novel.

The Illustrated Man, by Ray Bradbury, Avon Books, 1997, \$15.00

It's worth mentioning, if only briefly, this new reprint series from Avon. The books are small hard-covers (approximately 5" X 7"), attractively designed, and very affordable at fifteen dollars. This Bradbury volume features a new introduction and reprints all the wonderful stories that made up the original publication of the book.

It's hard to believe that it's now been forty-six years since these stories first saw print because they're still as vibrant and startling and telling as I remember them from my first reading, with strong characters, fascinating ideas, crisp dialogue. Yes, some of the settings and social mores might seem a little quaint. But one can look at it in another way, as well, that this is a glimpse into the mindset of the 1950s, a time capsule of a decade that gets progressively further away from us, the closer we come to slipping into the new millennium.

As such, it's as fascinating as visiting Dickens' London, or Poe's New England.

The Gaia Websters, by Kim Antieau, ROC, 1997, \$12.95

There are times when I get depressed about the state of the sf/f field, when I desperately want something new to read, instead of the same-old, same-old with a new cover, or the paper adventures of some celluloid or video characters. I'll sift through the galleys that have washed up into my P.O. box over the past month, and wander aimlessly through the local bookstores, searching...but to no avail. Then, just when I'm ready to give up on it all and take up skydiving or spelunking, someone like Kim Antieau comes along with a new book and all is well once more.

Regular readers of this column will remember my enthusiasm for her first published novel (*The Jigsaw Woman*, reviewed in my February 1996 column). On the basis of that book, and a scattering of short stories that I still reread on a regular basis, she has become one of those few authors I trust implicitly. I know she will pull no punches in the stories she chooses to tell. But in return I will be allowed to meet with

characters that are true originals, rather than enthusiastic shadows of someone else's vision. I will visit unfamiliar worlds and I will come away from them enriched by the experience, and perhaps even changed.

The Gaia Websters delivers all of the above.

Set in the American Southwest, in the near future when the industrialized world has imploded on itself, it follows the story of Gloria Stone — a healer who has no memory beyond waking up in a cave by herself ten years before the novel begins. There was so little evidence to her real identity that she had to name herself.

When the book opens, she has been the resident healer of the small community of Coyote Creek for some time, looking after the health of its residents in exchange for food and board. Her regular companions are a coyote named Cosmo and Benjamin, a Native man, the teaser being that she's never seen them together so she begins to wonder if they're one and the same.

But the peace of the community is soon shattered. It begins with the sudden interest the new priest has taken in her (in some communities, egged on by priests, healers such as herself have been executed) and quickly intensifies with the

arrival of a representative from the governor's office who wants Stone to leave Coyote Creek and work for him. When she refuses, a mysterious epidemic strikes the community and Stone's healing abilities become erratic — so much so that she's afraid she might harm those she hopes to heal.

Up to this point, with its mystic tone and mythic underpinnings, *The Gaia Websters* appears to have all the trappings of a fantasy, part of that subgenre that includes Stanley E. Lanier's *Hiero's Journey* and the like. But let me assure you that while the mystical and mythic elements remain, this is science fiction, and fascinating science fiction at that. I'd explain more fully, but I don't want to spoil your own delight at how it all plays out.

What I will say is that Antieau's new novel is even better than her first. The first-person narrator Stone has a wonderfully wry voice, the setting is so fully realized you can almost taste the berries and dust,

and Antieau plays fair throughout, for all the surprises she throws our way. Her extrapolations as to how our world came to be the one Stone inhabits ring true and serve as a warning — that how we treat each other and our habitat carries a great responsibility — but she's never didactic. Instead she does what all good writers do: she concentrates first and foremost on the engrossing problems of her characters, allowing the reader to take away his or her own connections to the problems and conflicts we all face, and how we might resolve them.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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BOOKS

ROBERT K.J. KILLHEFFER

Enemy of God, by Bernard Cornwell, St. Martin's Press, 1997, \$24.95

The Eagles' Brood, by Jack Whyte, Forge, 1997, \$25.95

The Eagle and the Sword, by A. A. Attanasio, HarperPrism, 1997, \$14.

WHEN I WAS about six or seven I had a book called *King Arthur and His Knights* that I think I read nearly a hundred times. It, and the heroic story it told, became an indelible part of my childhood experience, and as I grew older my interest in the Arthurian myth cycle didn't flag. John Boorman's film *Excalibur* came out when I was entering high school, and I saw it (I'm embarrassed to admit) more than 50 times over the next couple of years. Arthur was, and still in many ways

is, the defining myth of my imagination.

Nevertheless, there came a time when I could no longer get interested in another retelling of the old story. I had devoured every version I could find over the years, and had embraced some of the newer treatments (such as Gillian Bradshaw's excellent *Hawk of May* series) as readily as the classics, but somewhere along the way I found I just couldn't work up the energy anymore. I picked up Nikolai Tolstoy's massive volume, *The Coming of the King*, when it came out in 1988, but I never got very far into it. I started to think the Arthurian legend had lost its power to enchant me.

But, as the saying goes, never say never. A couple of years ago a friend of mine at St. Martin's Press (no, not the editor of this magazine) asked me to read an Arthurian novel from England and advise him on it (he was considering publishing it here in the U.S.), and I took to the

task with more than a little dismay. Could I get beyond my own boredom with the Arthurian mythos and give my friend some worthy advice? As it turned out, I didn't need to. The book won me over all on its own, and I realized that my interest in Arthuriana hadn't died, it had merely lain dormant, waiting for the right book to awaken it again. That book was the first of Bernard Cornwell's "Warlord Chronicles," *The Winter King*, and now St. Martin's has brought out the second volume, *Enemy of God*, which confirms Cornwell's series as the best Arthurian fiction since Gillian Bradshaw, if not Mary Stewart herself.

Cornwell presents an Arthur both familiar and strange: he gives us most of the people and places we expect — Uther Pendragon, Merlin, Lancelot, Guinevere, Galahad — and sets his tale in what has (since Mary Stewart) become the standard time and place (fifth-century Britain, shortly after the withdrawal of the Roman legions), but he gives the usual material some peculiar twists, and his background has an exceptionally gritty feel. Cornwell's Arthur is merely one of Uther's illegitimate sons, with no expectation of inheriting his position as High King; Lancelot is a fake, a

treacherous coward who lies and cheats to build up a reputation as a fierce warrior. Cornwell finds clever ways of planting the seeds of later legend: here, the sword that names the king is placed on a sacred stone, not *in* it, and the Knights of the Round Table are something Arthur tries in vain to establish, hoping for peace among the rival warlords of the land — without success.

Cornwell's narrator is Derfel, one of Arthur's best fighters who has since become a monk. He's writing his story for the benefit of Igraine (a different one, not Arthur's mother), who is often disappointed by the mundane events Derfel recounts — she wants the romance, the magic, the grandeur, and he is at pains to deny it all. "To hear the tales told at night-time hearth, you would think we had made a whole new country in Britain, named it Camelot and peopled it with shining heroes, but the truth is that we simply ruled Dumnonia as best we could, we ruled it justly and we never called it Camelot. I did not even hear that name till two years ago." It's not that Derfel doesn't revere the great events of which he was a part — he just wants them remembered as they really happened. His demythologizing has a wistfulness about it that

actually accentuates the tragedy of the tale.

Cornwell's unromanticized treatment extends to the details. He shows us battle as it really might have been back then, not Errol Flynn fencing duels but muddy, bloody, even boring pushing contests between opposing shield walls. The magic practiced by Merlin and Nimue has a rustic feel that's in stark contrast to romantic images of sorcery: a potion that sends Derfel into an hallucinatory trance is made from a simple mushroom, though he spares Igraine the less savory details ("the best way to make the red cap safe was for the wizard himself to eat the mushroom, then give the dreamer a cup of his urine to drink").

But what gives Cornwell's retelling the power to hold me where others have not is the way he focuses on the moral struggles at the core of the myth. The Arthurian saga has never been a simple tale of good versus evil, but of the impossible quest within each person to live a good, fair, and just life — and, by extension, to construct a good, fair, and just society in which to do it. Cornwell turns many of the traditional Arthurian episodes into examples of moral quandaries. In *Enemy of God*, we get the story of

Tristan and Iseult: Tristan, a friend of Arthur's, falls in love with the young Iseult, who is supposed to wed Tristan's aging father, King Mark, and they run off together, taking refuge in part of Arthur's territory. King Mark threatens war, and so Arthur must make the painful decision of whether to support his friend and see his peace come to ruin, or to betray his friendship for the good of the kingdom. (It's made the more complex because Tristan's impulsiveness so closely recalls Arthur's own behavior, when his elopement with Guinevere touched off a bloody conflict with the neighboring kingdom of Powys.) It's a situation like those we all face in the real world, where there's rarely a clear-cut path or a way to avoid hurting anyone. Cornwell strips the myths of their romance, but in so doing he recaptures their true potency.

Jack Whyte's "Camulod Chronicles" are not as fully engrossing nor satisfying as Cornwell's series, but Whyte also revives the familiar legends by blazing his own path into the material. He finds interesting ways of evoking the standard elements of the legend by spreading them out over several generations. Indeed, by the end of *The Eagles' Brood*, the third of six projected

volumes, Arthur has only just been born.

In the previous two volumes — *The Skystone* and *The Singing Sword* — Whyte told the story of Arthur's great-grandfather, Publius Varrus, a Roman legionary and master blacksmith who forges the blade Excalibur out of a meteorite. (Hence, the sword from the stone.) Varrus was lifelong friend of a Roman nobleman, Caius Cornelius Brittanicus, who recognized the crumbling of the Empire and founded a self-sufficient colony in southwestern Britain, named Camulod. Merlyn — Caius Merlyn Brittanicus — is Cornelius's grandson, born of a Roman father and a Celtic mother (hence his multi-ethnic name), and *The Eagles' Brood* is mainly his story.

Whyte's intricately structured and historically detailed retelling has a power of conviction that keeps one reading, but his skills as a storyteller — on a purely mechanical level — leave something to be desired. Often there's an aimlessness to his narrative, a lack of dramatic pulse and progress, so that it falls almost entirely to the reader to determine when a scene should be read as a momentous development of the plot, or as a mere episode without long-reaching ramifica-

tions. Whyte also has trouble conveying his characters' emotions — he tends to *tell* us what they're feeling, rather than helping us *see* it through their thoughts, words, and deeds. (This makes for an especial awkwardness when the tale is being told by first-person narrators.)

Nevertheless, Whyte's story has an undeniable power that goes beyond the borrowed resonances of the mythic tales he's reworking. For every scene of indeterminate significance there's one of well-crafted action, and just when you're afraid that the narrative is wandering hopelessly and may never return to the central thread, back it comes with something gripping. And *The Eagles' Brood* improves on its predecessors — Merlyn's a better, more variable and interesting narrator than his great-uncle Varrus, and the narrative here, edging closer and closer to the heart of the Arthurian saga, picks up speed and sweep, particularly in the second half. What helps drive the plot in this volume is the strained relationship between Merlyn and his cousin, Uther Pendragon.

The rift between them begins when Uther's sexual advances are rebuffed by a deaf-mute servant girl, and he stalks off, swearing revenge. Later that night, the girl shows up

beaten nearly to death and raped savagely, and Merlyn suspects — though he would rather not — that Uther is the culprit. His feelings in the matter grow more complicated when he finds himself falling for the deaf girl, installing her in his secret valley retreat, nursing her back to health, and eventually marrying her. Meanwhile, events surge forward. The colony has become the target of fierce attacks by Lot, self-styled king of Cornwall, and Merlyn and Uther are busy defending their families and their territory. All the while Merlyn worries over Uther, one day sure he's the monster who hurt his wife, the next guilt-ridden for even thinking that his beloved cousin could be at fault.

Whyte's story makes gestures toward the philosophical soul-searching that gives Cornwell's books their depth, but the issues never take on the visceral power of the Tristan and Iseult episode in *Enemy of God*. Partly this is due to Whyte's problems in communicating his characters' emotions tangibly enough to get us involved in their internal struggles, but even more it's the result of Whyte's less ambiguous outlook. Where Cornwell presents many competing views of the best destiny of Britain, Whyte rarely wavers in his

exaltation of Roman order over any other social structure of the time. It's only toward the very end of *The Eagles' Brood* that he invites any significant challenge to that idea at all; Merlyn meets a trader who deals with the Saxons as well as the Celts and the remaining Romans, and Merlyn's shocked that the man might consider the invading Saxons as anything other than inhuman monsters. The trader, for his part, offers some points we've been hoping to hear for most of the book: "Of course the Romans came here for a purpose," he tells Merlyn. "They came to conquer and to pillage.... who is to say that the Roman purpose was more noble than the Saxons' is?"

What makes the Arthurian cycle so compelling for me is its acknowledgment of the difficulty of finding hard and fast moral principles to live by, and of keeping to them once they've been found. I'm hoping that future volumes of Whyte's series build on the ambiguity that pokes its nose in toward the end of *The Eagles' Brood* — if so, it will balance the wealth of historical detail and intricacy with the moral and philosophical heft that are the hallmark of a great retelling.

A. A. Attanasio's series of Arthurian novels, which began with last year's *The Dragon and the Unicorn* and continues in *The Eagle and the Sword*, has a wildly different feel from Cornwell's and Whyte's, despite being set in essentially the same time and place: it's fifth-century Britain again, where the last vestiges of Rome are merging with the native Celtic culture in response to the invasions of Saxons, Angles, and Jutes from the continent. Though he's not nearly so interested in the historical texture as Cornwell or Whyte, Attanasio still ties his tale very closely to something approximating reality—his locales correspond to actual places in Roman and early medieval Britain, his politics reflect the conflicts of the time, his people live and work and fight within a setting that owes more to historical reconstruction than to flights of fancy.

What he adds to this, though, makes his version by far the most fantastical of the three: where Cornwell and Whyte rationalize the appearances of magic in their stories, and provide mundane sources for the stories that have become our Arthurian legends, Attanasio places his retelling in a context rife with actual sorcery, living gods, angels, demons, elves, dwarves, and an

intricate mytho-cosmology that encompasses the history of creation.

Attanasio's Britain is the battleground for a long-running struggle among the gods, represented on the one hand by the Furor (Odin), the god of the Northmen, and on the other by the gods of the pagan Celts (the Daoíne Sidh) and the "nailed god" of the Romans (Christ). Merlin is a demon cast into the world as part of the Furor's plot gone awry; he has been entrapped in a human form and has come to love the material world and its creatures where, as a demon, he had hated them all. The Earth is inhabited by (or maybe simply *is*) a vast dragon, singing to its fellow dragons circling the distant stars. The hollow hills are home to elves and their god-king. Someone Knows the Truth, who appears as a man with the head of an elk. And so on: in Attanasio's world, the human realm is like the spectrum of visible light, a tiny sliver of reality, intimately connected to the other unseen frequencies and yet often unaware of them.

For all its inclusion of familiar fantastical beings, Attanasio's fantasy is built on a framework of science fiction. His gods and demons are beings of electromagnetism, living in the World Tree that is the

magnetosphere of the planet itself. Magic is the operation of these forces on the elements of matter: Brokk, the Furor's dwarf blacksmith who forged Excalibur, "knows how the world fits together in tiny pieces called atoms and how the atoms themselves are put together with tinier pieces yet." Attanasio isn't reaching for a hard-science Arthurian legend; he uses the conceit to add a richer flavor to the myths, a link to scientific realities that lets the story bear even more closely on the world we know as our own.

In the first volume, Attanasio related the history of Uther and Ygraine — how the demon Merlin built Uther into Britain's greatest warlord and joined him with the Celtic queen Ygraine to produce Arthor, the king who will hold off the invading Saxons and bring Britain a brief reign of peace before the darkness closes in. At the end of *The Dragon and the Unicorn*, Merlin takes Arthor from Ygraine to conceal him from the Furor and his other enemies while he grows to manhood.

The Eagle and the Sword finds Arthor now grown, living as the ward of the Celtic king Kyner. Even as a youth he has an amazing fighting fury, but he's far from the blessed

ruler Britain awaits — he's bitter and angry, cruel and bloodthirsty. "Arthor knows nothing of mercy," observes his foster father. But while Merlin prepares the festival at which he'll have Arthor pull the magic blade Excalibur from the stone (here, the stone is a magnetic meteorite), Arthor undergoes adventures that will transform him into a new man, more ready to become king.

Attanasio's series is not only the most markedly fantastic, it's by far the most lyrically written of the recent Arthur books — "every sparrow strung on its thread of song is stitched brightly against the blue curve of heaven," he writes, word-strands of equal beauty and vision on every page. Here and there Attanasio achieves moments of aching emotion unlike anything in either Cornwell or Whyte, as when Merlin befriends a mongrel dog whom he names Master Sphenks, giving it not only affection but greater intelligence with his magic. "How eerie and beautiful to be here with this two-leg, whose kind have always before thrown rocks, the little dog says with its flurrying tail.... Overhead, opulent clouds stream past, and Master Sphenks grins sweetly into life's everlasting flow."

With his elaborate mystical

trappings making the expected seem strange, Attanasio's retelling has the most unusual feel of any Arthurian story I've seen in...well, maybe ever, and that's certainly a part of why I find his version so fresh and engaging. But there's another element that it shares with Cornwell's and Whyte's that helps explain why these books have held me where others have not. What has always moved me most in the Arthurian myth is the deep sense of loss that informs the story, the awareness of inescapable tragedy, not merely on a personal level, as in a tragic Greek or Shakespearean play, but on a cosmic plane, the plane of myth. The Arthur story, more than any other tale in our cultural heritage, recognizes the essential hopelessness of our struggles — all that we build, all

that we achieve, must eventually crumble, and all even the best of us can do is hold a flickering match against the creeping darkness. What's great about Arthur is that we know, as he does, that in the long run his cause is doomed, and the best he can do is delay the inevitable. And yet he fights on. Cornwell captures that sense the best, in the voice of Derfel, who has seen the dream rise and shatter against the forces of history. "All that we loved is broken," he writes, "all that we made is pulled down and all that we sowed is reaped by the Saxons." But he doesn't write to say that it was all for naught — he writes because he knows, as Arthur knows, that even against the hopelessness of eventual darkness, perhaps especially against that, it's the fight that matters. ♣

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SATISFACTION GUARANTEED

Nancy Springer has written nearly three dozen books for adults and for younger readers. Among her more recent novels are the young adult novels Looking for Jamie Bridger and Secret Star and the fantasies Larque on the Wing and Fair Peril, and a new novel entitled I Am Mordred is in the works.

In this story, just as she did in Fair Peril, she takes classic fantasy elements and reinvents them in a modern context, with great results.

Transcendence

By Nancy Springer

Jeremy C. Bow
Caldwell 302
Tewksbury College
Tewksbury, NJ 01234



S. CHAVADON TIER
c/o Copper Lily Publishing
Box 14792
Tucson, AZ 71053-4792

Dear Ms. Tier,

I love your poetry. I love your poetry. I love your poetry. I am writing to tell you how much I love your poetry. More than I can say. Lines like,

"My dreams would grow hair on a heron
I have douched a dead duck with maraschino
I have danced with Dahmer in my denims from the Gap
I hide an apricot beneath my Calvin Kleins"

Lines like those — I don't begin to know what they mean yet they make me feel a sense of awe and transcendence. I keep your book *Angels Fly to the Largest Shopping Mall in the Known Universe* under my pillow, and it helps me get through the times when college sucks. I believe poetry like yours makes a real difference in the world. I believe it has the power to change things. I know it keeps me going.

Your bio says you live in Manhattan. I am not that far away and if it would not interrupt your writing schedule too much I would love to buy you dinner and tell you in person how much your poetry means to me. I very much hope to hear from you.

Fervidly yours,
Jeremy Bow

* * * * *

CHAVADON TIER
140 W. 56th St.
New York NY 10001

Jeremy Bow
Caldwell 302
Tewksbury College
Tewksbury NJ 01234

Dear Mr. Bow:

Thank you for your letter of unctuous praise. Thank you for not asking me to read your poetry, answer twenty questions for your literature course, or recommend your illustrations to my editor. You seem very nice; therefore please be assured you do not want to meet me, as I am quite nasty.

Sincerely,
Chavadon Tier

Jeremy C. Bow
Caldwell 302
Tewksbury College
Tewksbury, NJ 01234

Chavadon Tier
140 W. 56th St.
New York, NY 10001

Dear Ms. Tier,

I am ecstatic to receive a reply from you. Of course I will never ask you to look at my poetry or my artwork — I wouldn't dare. What you are doing is so far above my level I can't breathe when you take me up there with you. How can you call yourself nasty? Are you suffering from low self-esteem? Please believe me, only a caring, sensitive person could have written,

We are wounded constantly yet on we ride
Side by side
We believe in the lovers' grail
We know we cannot fail to find
the halo we left behind
waiting at the end of the rainbow

Perhaps you are thinking of some of your darker verse? But only one with a deep understanding of human nature could have written,

Ontological goodness is a bore
Beauty smiles but the Beast knows the score

which is one of my favorite couplets which I have penned in toilet stalls all over campus, always of course attributing it to you. I will be in New York on the afternoon of the 19th, and will ring your doorbell just in case. Again, may I thank you from the bottom of my heart for the constant gift of your poetry.

Most unctuously yours,
Jeremy Bow

* * * * *

CHAVADON TIER
140 W. 56th St.
New York NY 10001

Mr. Jeremy Bow,

Hell no, I do not suffer from low self-esteem. I suffer fools not lightly, is what I suffer. But perhaps I overreact; perhaps I did not make myself clear. Read my lips: YOU DO NOT WANT TO COME NEAR ME. I AM HIDEOUSLY UGLY. In body and spirit. Axl Rose is a blooming sweetie compared to me, and Rambo is apple pan dandy with whipped cream and a cherry on top. I am poet, hear me roar, I know who the hell you are. You are a doe-eyed, pimplesque, milky-mouthed sophomore with bitty buttocks and heart thumpies that shake your rickety wee ribs. I feed on babies like you. Be warned.

Sincerely,
Chavadon Tier

* * * * *

Dear Chavadon,

There, that wasn't so bad, was it? Are you sorry you let me in? I'm glad you did, if only so you could see that I am not overly pimplesque or bitty-butted. The heart thumpies you are right about. I am thrilled to have met you, and in contrast to the Tewksbury Thought Police's everlasting political correctness, your trenchant honesty goes down like wine. I admire what you have done with your life. It must be very difficult having such a serious facial deformity in addition to glandular problems. No wonder you are a recluse. Thank you very, very much for letting me visit you after all.

You claim to be ugly in body and soul. I guess it is sort of a cliché that people who come in unattractive packages should hide good things inside, and I can't blame you for bucking the stereotype, trying to be negative and cynical and old and tired when you are really not much older than I am. But I'm not buying any of it. I am sure there is a wonderful idealistic

dreamer somewhere deep inside you, wanting to make things happen, wanting to change the world. I am sure your poetry is more true to the real Chavadon Tier than your crusty mannerisms are.

May I come again? Dinner next time. If you don't want to be seen in a restaurant, we'll send out for Chinese or something.

Very best regards,
Jeremy

.....

Dear Jeremy,

You are wrong, wrong, wrong about me! The "crusty mannerisms" are not packaging; the poetry is. Get this: nastiness = reality, poetry = fairytale, okay? It's all PR, don't you see? I have built myself a palace of poetry, all mirrors and fountains and fancy lighting and special effects, and I myself am the monster who hides "deep inside," to use your youthful excavation imagery. You have penetrated my palace, and the lumpen freak-face you see is what you get. You have found, in its entirety, the misshapen prize in the crackerjack box. Congratulations.

You say you find my honesty refreshing, but you have not heard so much honesty from me yet as spleen. I called you a milk-drinking sophomore, when you are a damned lovely young animal and you know it, don't you? Wide wise hazel eyes, for God's sake. Fawn-golden faun-soft skin over those austere cheekbones. Innocent sensual mouth. Muscle. Shoulders. Sweet yielding smile. Where the hell did you come from? I didn't think they made them like you anymore, old-fashioned beautiful idealistic kids who write letters.

It beats me why physical beauty bears so much weight in the universe anyway, but it does. I see it, and my heart turns over. So be it.

You ask if you can come see me again. Last time I told you not to, and you came anyway. This time I am going to tell you yes, by all means, come see me, and maybe that will keep you away.

Chavadon

.....

Dear Chavadon,

Dinner was excellent. Thank you. I had never experienced home-delivery French before. It was memorable. You seem to think I am doing you a favor by spending time with you, like I'd be fighting off hordes of panting coeds otherwise. Riiiiight. In case you haven't noticed, dirty guys with tattoos and nose hair are in. Drugheads are in. Sneers are in. I don't have enough "attitude," whatever that means. And as for where I came from, I come from Iowa — how uncool. Nobody is interested in me.

I wish I had the talent to be a writer, make something of my life that way. Give it meaning. Alchemize art out of pain. I admire what you do so much, yet you seem to think I'm a fool for loving your poetry. You keep telling me to shut up about it, go read Yeats, your stuff is nothing but a plastic flim-flam, it's a sham, a cosmetic illusion you've put between you and the world, it's your labyrinth to hide in. But that's nuts. I can't believe you think your poetry is something separate from you. I can't believe you think it misrepresents you. Your poetry came out of you, it's an emanation of you, it's your soul, don't you see? And it is beautiful. Therefore you are beautiful.

I'll see you next week. Let me pay for dinner this time.

Love,
Jeremy

* * * * *

Dear Jeremy,

God, you signed your letter "love," what do I have to do to make you see I am a big ugly joke? Listen to me for once. My poetry which you so adore is a consummate farce. Here is how I write it: I put buzzwords on squares of scrap paper, throw them all in a margarine tub and pull them out two at a time. Whatever gets paired up, I just splice it together into a line. It's totally random. It doesn't mean a thing, understand? It's a party game.

You think you mean something to me? I can fix that. I can write a poem about you. All I have to do is come up with some Jeremy words, thus:

milk	pagan god
hazel eyes	Bugle Boys honey
cheekbones	wise child
boat shoes	shoulders angel

Then I throw them all in the butter cup, mix them up and pour them out and stick them together with syrup. It's no more challenging than those collages kiddies make out of magazine clippings for summer-camp arts&crafts. It means nothing.

If you still want to come next week, let me know and I will cook. You can't afford to feed me. You have no idea how ravenous I can be.

Chavadon

* * * * *

Dear Chavadon,

Whoa, I never knew mere food could be so good! Anybody who can make meringue like that has the soul of an artist, so stop trying to tell me you're a fake. I don't care what you say about the way you create your poetry; it's the manifestation that counts, and the transcendence is *there*. You ask where did I come from — well, where the hell did you come from? You are the most amazing person I have ever met.

I've been thinking about you a lot. Do you have family? Are there people (besides me) who care about you?

Care about you, hell, I need a good dose of your honesty. What I am really trying to say is, are there people who love you? Maybe that's a sophomoric question, maybe the way you keep company with the angels you're above wanting hugs and kisses, but I have to ask because I am kind of obsessed by the idea of love. I guess love is what I want the most in the world, because I haven't had much so far. My family is a mess — I don't want to bore you with a lot of sob-story detail, I'll just say it's bad, abusive, and I've survived by leaving it behind. (Thank God for scholarships.) So I try not to look back, I look to the future, and what I dream about is finding what I haven't had in the past. You know. A beautiful girl — no, a beautiful woman who by some miracle wants me, and I fall like crazy, and when we touch the earth moves, and we build a life together, the whole hearts-

beating-as-one cliché. And I don't know why I am being so inane and babbling about myself when what I really started to say was, do you have family or are you alone? Because if you are alone, that makes two of us.

What made you start writing poetry? Was it this love thing? When thousands of people love your poems, does that count as thousands of people loving you?

Maybe, seriously, that is what I should do — learn to write. But I don't exactly want to be famous. I really just want somebody to love me. Do you want the same thing?

See you next week? Please? I swear I'll pay for the food this time.

Love,
Jeremy

* * * * *

Dear Jeremy,

Oh, Jeremy, my beautiful Jeremy, what am I going to do? No. Absolutely not. Do not come here anymore — the mansion where I live, made of poetry, it is a prison, Jeremy, not a palace. Stay away. Do not think anymore about being a writer, about being alone, about being like me, any of that. Save yourself, run from me. You are young and full of heart and you do not deserve to be devoured by a lonesome loathsome thing. I am hideous, but you are so lovely all the flower-faced girls will adore you once they wake up and see. I swear it. They will all love you.

Jeremy gazes with wise hazel eyes

In the morning love comes to him

With alar cheekbones he seeks transcendence

In stone-washed denim love comes to him.

Jeremy waits with his soul unfurled

In Jordache jeans love comes to him

With a sweet mouth he awaits her

On a lazy angel wind she comes to him.

Jeremy stands in the harsh wet grass

In a halo of beauty love comes to him

He watches her shoulders for a sign of wings
In a dress by Lauren love comes to him.
Jeremy blinks into the sunrise
Love comes to him, love comes to him
She kisses him on his innocent lips
In the morning love comes to him.
Love comes to him.
Love comes to him.
In a halo of beauty love comes to him.

There. A poem for you and only you, Jeremy. I will never publish it.
Okay, so I used a few words besides the ones I threatened to. Okay, so maybe I did not pull it out of a margarine tub. Maybe I even mean some of it, awright? Keep it and be happy.

It beats me why you want to hang around me anyway. What the hell is this, beauty and the beast? Thank God I did not give you my unlisted number. Stay away.

Chavadon

* * * * *

Dear Chavadon,

I know you made cranky get-lost noises at me in your last letter, the one with the poem, but I do not for a minute believe any of them. I just want you to know you don't fool me. I would have been there at the usual time except I had to be somewhere else.

It was an amazing poem. I don't know what to say. Thank you.

The strangest thing has been happening. Maybe you gave me confidence or something, but all of a sudden, like the morning after you sent me that "love comes to him" poem, girls started saying hi to me and smiling at me everywhere. Okay, I'll be honest, the reason I was not in the city last week is that I had a date with a girl to go skydiving, of all things. I can't believe I did that, but I loved it, I want to do it again. It's scary, but wonderful, almost like flying.

Talking with you is like that, like flying. See you next week?

Love,
Jeremy

* * * * *

Dear Chavadon,

Why have I not heard from you? Are you not feeling well?

I should get in there to check on you, but — God, what did you put in that poem, anyway? Love potion? Was the ink made of something you could bottle and market and sell for a billion \$\$\$? This is so weird and wonderful, I have not had a spare moment, and now it's all happening, it's all coming together, better than skydiving and even scarier, I am terrified and ecstatic, I go around trembling and babbling and grinning and looking at the sky. I think I am in love. Her name is Temple — isn't that a beautiful name? She is brainy, rude, kind, quirky, brave, sweet, exquisite — floating auburn hair, and perfect, almost translucent skin, and long legs, and — oh, she is damn indescribable. I want her clear to my bones, to the marrow of my bones. And she seems to want me the same way. I can't believe it, she actually seems to feel something for me.

I am flying too high to say anything intelligent or even very coherent, so I had better just go. Let me know how you are doing, and I will keep you posted.

Luv,
Jeremy

* * * * *

Dear Chavadon,

Temple and I are getting married. Her family has completely accepted me, which is wonderful, almost as wonderful as she is. We have gone to pick out rings. I cannot tell you how happy I am.

Since I have not heard from you in months, I guess you really meant it after all — you just want me to stay away from you. I won't write you after this, or bother you with a wedding invitation or anything. But I had to let you know I have found what I was looking for, because somehow I can't help feeling I need to thank you. Thank you. Thank you for your poetry; it got me through a hard time. I wish I could send you a package full of the ecstasy I am feeling now. I want that kind of happiness for you.

All good wishes,
Jeremy Bow

Dear Jeremy,

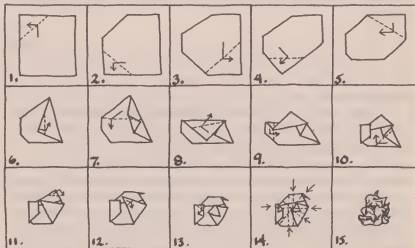
I am dictating this letter to a nurse, so it will be short. I have not been in very good health, and am receiving absolutely no visitors.

This is one time Beauty knows the score. Yes, I just want you to stay away, because nobody has ever understood me as you do. Everything you have said about my poetry is true, and that is dangerous. KEEP OUT.

I am publishing a final volume, *Transcendence*, with the proceeds going to you and Temple. Your goodness was never a bore. I wish you all the happiness in the world.

Love forever,
Chavadon 

ADVANCED ORIGAMI



honey

Jack Williamson published his first story in 1928 and his most recent novel, The Black Sun, came out late last year. Here he brings us a surreal tale of a man whose problems look small...

The Hole in the World

By Jack Williamson

DEAR DAD," AMY'S NOTE began, "I found your address on a letter from Mom's lawyer. You don't have to write back to me, but I hope you will.

I want to know if you are happy with Miss Winkle. Mom says she's a vicious bitch. I hope that's wrong. I'm awful sad about the trouble I made between you and Mom. I know I was sometimes so bad you had to hit me, but I'll always love you. Even if you can't pay the support.

"If you can write back, please send it to Millie. She's my best friend. Her address is on the envelope. Dad, I want you to know I love you. I always will, no matter what."

The signature was a messy ink stain. She must have cried on it. Maybe she really did love him. She had even sworn she did, crying on the witness stand. She'd told the judge he hadn't hit her often. Never really hard. She had gotten the bruises and broken her arm when she tripped and fell down the stairs.

A cute little kid, but he couldn't risk an answer. Gretchen and her

blood-sucking attorney would eat him alive with anything they got their greedy hands on. He ran the letter through the shredder. His worry today was the spot on his chin. He had first noticed it while he was shaving.

A tiny white spot with jagged edges, it looked like a fleck of eggshell. But it wasn't eggshell. His fingers couldn't feel it. It wouldn't rub off. Frowning at it, he studied his face again. Still firm enough, pleasing enough when he smiled. The white fleck was still there, but he had other matters on his mind.

He'd been alone all week, but Creighton and Zara were both due back today. Creighton had been off at company headquarters, setting up his new franchise. Zara was away in Dayton, where her sister was having a baby. The franchise meant money, and Zara loved money as much as he loved her. He was picking her up at noon.

And tonight —

Thinking of tonight, he let the razor foil caress his face again. His chin had to be smooth, because whiskers scratched Zara's delicate skin. She loved to have him begin with a massage of her sweet little feet and work up from there. He splashed aftershave in his hand and rubbed the spot again.

Still there, it looked larger. Maybe a floater? But floaters were dark and it was white. He shut one eye and then the other. Both eyes saw it. Maybe he'd had a drink too many at Steve's stag party. He tried to whistle on his way downstairs, but his lips were dry and a dull ache throbbed at the back of his skull and the house was too empty.

Gretchen had taken most of the furniture as well as the kids, but Amy had left her school photo tacked to the refrigerator door with a heart-shaped magnet. The spot blotted out half her freckled grin. He ran hot water out of the tap to make instant coffee and ate a stale doughnut before he hurried to the office.

Creighton wasn't in.

"He said he'd be here," he told the secretary, "to talk about the franchise — "

"Ask him about it." She was a straight-spined, sharp-voiced, God-crazed spinster who had never liked him. "He called from Hawaii to say he'll be in later today."

"Hawaii?" Goggling at her, he saw the spot above her lifted nose. "I thought he was in Chicago, arranging my new franchise."

"Chicago?" She pushed up her glasses to give him an indignant glare. "Mr. Creighton has been on vacation in Hawaii. He'll be here this afternoon."

She swung back to her computer.

What the hell? Creighton hadn't mentioned Hawaii. He rubbed his chin and tried to check his sales totals for the month, but the spot blanked the figures out. His head was pounding. His throat felt parched. He got a drink of water and looked at his chin in the lavatory mirror. No longer white, it shone like a fleck of tinfoil. He washed his face and saw it still there.

Bothered more than ever, he called Dr. Kroman, the eye man on the top floor. He knew the nurse, a feisty little redhead. She said she could work him in if he came up at ten. He studied the spot again. Now it was nearly the color of blood and flickering unsteadily, though still there was nothing he could feel. The face of his watch was a crimson shimmer, but he could read the office clock. He went up at ten and the nurse put him in a heavy chair with his head in a vise.

Kroman was a fat, wheezy man who smelled faintly of something that didn't quite cover an unpleasant breath. Squinting through a battery of lenses, he endured the breath and a dagger of light stabbing his eyes. The spot made it hard to tell which lens was better, but Kroman seemed not to care.

"Sir, you're a lucky man!" Booming cheerily, Kroman backed away. "I find nothing organic. Your eyes are perfectly normal."

"But I've still got the spot." He sat blinking at it. "It's bigger now, turning yellow."

"It's nothing physical." Kroman shrugged at his anxiety. "Nothing at all. If you're really concerned, you might talk to a good psychologist."

"I am concerned. When I look past your head, all I see is a hole in the wall."

"Really?" Kroman chuckled as if at a joke and popped a breath-saver into his mouth.

"Doctor, I'm not crazy!" He squinted at Kroman, who was suddenly headless. "Not that crazy."

"I don't say you are." Kroman smothered another chuckle. "I'm no psychiatrist, but you shouldn't hesitate if you think you need help. A mental condition is no disgrace today."

The nurse was at the door, urgently beckoning.

"Solipsism!" Kroman started after her and turned back. "Ever hear of that? The philosophic theory that the self is the only reality. The rest of the world only illusion. Logically, you can't prove the existence of anything outside yourself. All you really know, or think you know, is what you see and hear and feel. The rest could be hallucination. A fascinating notion, don't you think?"

A cold fist had clenched on his stomach. He felt too sick to think.

"If your problem persists — " Kroman's voice was a far-off drone he hardly heard. "You might want to consult a competent neurologist. The mind's still a mystery. Even the senses are sometimes tricky. You can still feel the fingers of an amputated arm."

The nurse beckoned again, but Kroman wasn't through.

"Think about it, sir! Just think about it. For all you could prove, God may have created your whole world exclusively for you."

He tried not to think about it. When the nurse came back to show him out, he wanted to kid her about the heat in her fire-colored hair, but the spot had blotted it out.

"Solipsism!" The word haunted him down to his car. "Solipsism."

A philosophic theory? Philosophic hogwash! The blustery wind was real, and its diesel taint. No doubt about the snarling traffic and a howling ambulance. The steering wheel was real, solid to his hands. The whole world a sham, set up by a trickster God to test his soul? He didn't believe in God. He didn't believe he had a soul. He'd never believed in anything except himself.

The spot had swelled and darkened, now a murky brown. The traffic lights were hard to see, but he learned to make them out by looking slightly aside. He was in the terminal when Zara's plane came in. People had no faces, but he caught her tight black jeans and the purple lei around her neck.

"Sorry, Jake." Her voice had an impatient edge, and she slipped away before he could kiss her. "You can talk to Ed."

Creighton was just behind her, about to walk around him.

"Ed?" He caught Creighton's sleeve. "Wait a minute."

"Harley?" Creighton blinked at him in sleepy surprise. "If you're here about that franchise, better find another fish to fry."

"But I thought — " The spot hid Creighton's eyes, but he saw the sunburn and the pink paper lei. "I don't understand."

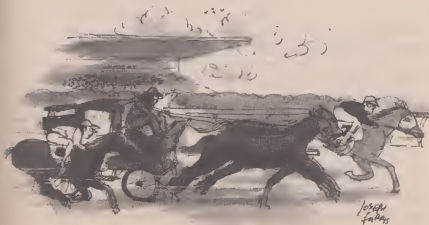
"You can blame your ex-wife's attorney." Creighton moved to follow Zara. "He called last month, trying to locate you. He convinced us that you're not the man we wanted."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Your new ex-wife." Creighton looked after Zara, who was walking on, the tight black jeans twitching seductively. "She wanted time to make up her mind. We've had a wonderful week together, and I helped her make it up." He caught a hint of Creighton's grin. "No problem there."

His car was hard to find. Bigger and blacker than ever, the spot made it harder still to drive. He rear-ended a bright red Taurus stopped at a light, and sat with the driver cursing him for a stone-blind idiot till the cops came. He couldn't see much of them, but they gave him a ticket and called a wrecker and stopped a taxi to take him home.

The driver helped with the key. He stumbled inside and blinked to find himself. Amy's photo was gone when he squinted for it, and most of the refrigerator. He had to feel his way to the stairs. The railing slid out of his hand before he reached the top, and he felt the house crumbling under him. Clutching at nothing, he fell into nowhere. ¶



In the course of the epic fantasy Beowulf (as you scholars may recall), we're treated to a lot of boasting and "kenning" (describing ordinary objects in grand terms). I like to think that the impulse toward aggrandizement is one of the prime driving forces in fantasy, that desire to tell a whopper so big and yet so true that we've got to accept it on some level. The American tall tale seems like a good example of this sort of exaggeration, as do the urban legends that have been popular more recently. But what happens to these big boasts over time? That's just one question addressed in this fantastic new fantasy from the author of The Movement of Mountains.

Paul and Me

By Michael Blumlein

I FIRST MET PAUL IN '71, THE year I got out of college. I was bumming around the country, crashing in city parks and church basements, cadging food and

companionship, avoiding the future. In keeping with the spirit of the times, I considered my carefree and unfettered existence both highly evolved and intrinsically righteous, when in truth I had no fucking idea. It didn't matter. My girlfriend was in New York City, living in a commune and doing guerrilla theater. My ex-girlfriend was in Vancouver, B.C. with her boyfriend, who'd fled the U.S. because of the draft. Those two women were ballast for me. In my imagination anyway, they were fixed points and gave me the security to do what I wanted in between.

I'd been in Bozeman a few days when I was busted for stealing a sandwich. After a night in jail, the judge threw me out of town. The first ride I got was headed to Seattle, but I wasn't ready for another city quite yet. I got out in Wenatchee, caught a ride to Carlton and two days later, a pack on my back and enough brown rice to last a week, was in the high country north of Lake Chelan.

There is nothing like the mountains to feel simultaneously large and small. Incomparably large, I should say, and insignificantly small. Distances are vast, and yet life, because conditions are so exacting, is condensed. At the higher elevations the trees and wildflowers, the voles that skitter in and out of rocks, even the mosquitoes seem lilliputian. Which made Paul, at first glance, all the more striking.

He was kneeling by the edge of a stream, taking a drink of water. He had on those trademark jeans of his, the navy blue suspenders, the plaid shirt. From a distance he looked as big as a house, up close even bigger. Because of his size I expected him to be oafish, but he was nothing of the kind. He moved with remarkable grace, dipping his cupped hand delicately into the water then sipping from it with the poise of a lady sipping tea.

I was alone. It was July, and I had camped by a lake in a high meadow two valleys over. That morning I had gone exploring, following the drainage creek down as it fell through a boulder-strewn slope of fir and pine. An hour of walking brought me to the confluence of another, similar-sized creek, at which point the water picked up force. The trail leveled off for about a hundred yards, then dropped precipitously. This was the site of a magnificent waterfall, sixty, seventy feet high. Paul was at the far end of a deep pool carved by the water. His hair was dark and short, his beard trim, his lips as red as berries. Waves of reflected sunlight lit his face. He had the eyes of a dreamer.

The trail zigzagged down a granite cliff, coming out near the base of the waterfall. The noise was deafening and masked my approach. By the time he noticed me, I wasn't more than a stone's throw away. He stopped drinking, and a frown crossed his face. Quickly, this gave way to a stiff kind of courtesy, a seemliness and a handsome, though remote, civility. His public persona. I apologized for intruding and was about to continue on my way when he motioned me over.

Standing, he was thirty feet tall; kneeling, nearly half that height. His thighs when I first met him were as wide as tree trunks; his biceps, like mountains. As I drew near, he stood up and stretched, momentarily blotting out the sky. Then, as though conscious of having dwarfed me and wanting to put me at ease, he sat down and leaned back against a pine, which, though venerable, bent beneath him like rubber.

It was he who spoke first. His voice was deep and surprisingly gentle.

"Hello."

"Hello," I answered.

"Nice day."

"Incredible."

He looked at the sky, which was cloudless. Sunlight streamed down.

"Doesn't get any better."

"Can't," I replied insipidly.

An awkward silence followed, then he asked if I came here often. I said it was my first time.

"You?" I asked.

"Every few months. It's a little hot for me this time of year. In the summer I tend to stay farther north."

I was wearing a T-shirt and shorts. He was in long pants and a flannel shirt with the sleeves rolled up partway. I suggested that he might be more comfortable in other clothes.

"I like to stay covered," he replied, which nowadays would mean he wanted to keep out of the sun but then was more ambiguous. I searched for something else to keep the conversation alive.

"So what made you come?" I asked. "South, I mean."

He shrugged. "I don't know. I had an urge."

I nodded. Urges I knew about. My whole last year of college had been one urge after another. Sex, drugs, sit-ins. As a life, it was dizzying. And now, having hiked into the high country with the lofty purpose of getting away from it all, of finding a little perspective, here I was talking to a man as tall as a tower. I was no less dizzy than before, and beyond that, I was humbled by the realization that the very impulsiveness I was running from was what had gotten me into the mountains to begin with. I had to steady myself against a rock, and even then my head spun. Thinking the light-headedness might in part be a product of hunger, I took out a bag of peanuts. I offered him some, but he shook his head.

"I'm allergic to nuts. I blow up like a blimp."

This was news to me. Of everything I'd read or heard about him, nothing ever mentioned his being sick. I didn't know he could be.

"You don't want to be around," he said. "When you're used to pulling up trees like toothpicks and knocking off mountain tops like cream puffs,

it's no fun being weak as a kitten. I'm a lousy invalid. Worse if I'm really sick. I had a fever once that started a fire and chills that fanned the flames so hot that half the camp burned down before the boys finally got it out. Then they had to truck in three days of snow to cool me off."

I could picture it. "One time I had a fever like that. It made me hallucinate. I was reading a book and the characters started appearing in my room. It was freaky."

"This was no hallucination," he said indignantly.

In those days, theories of the mind were undergoing a radical transformation. The word psychotic was being used in some circles interchangeably with the word visionary, and people who hallucinated without drugs were held, at least theoretically, in high esteem. Obviously, Paul didn't see it that way, and I apologized if I'd offended him. At the same time it surprised me that he'd care.

"I have a reputation to uphold," he said.

It turned out he'd been getting bits and pieces of news from the lower forty-eight and knew, for example, about the Vietnam War, the protests, the race riots, women's liberation and the like. Institutions were toppling everywhere. Traditions were in a state of upheaval. The whole thing had him worried, and I tried to reassure him.

"As far as I know, your reputation's intact."

"For now."

"Don't worry about it."

"No? How about what's happening to your President Nixon? He was loved once. Now look at him."

Love seemed a strong word, and even then, it was hard to believe Paul considered himself in the same category as a man on his ignominious way out of the White House.

"People are fickle," he said. "Times change, you don't, and what happens? All of a sudden you're a villain."

"Fame's a bitch," I said without much sympathy.

He gave me a look, and for an instant I thought I had gone too far. What did I know of impetuosity? He could squash me like an ant. But then he laughed, and the Earth, god bless her, trembled too.

"I'm not famous, little man. I'm a legend."

We ended up spending a week together. He took me north to his logging camp, which lay in a valley between two wooded ridges. He kept Babe in a pen at the foot of the valley beside the river that drained it, and every afternoon for an hour or two the ox would dutifully lie on his side and dam up the churning water, creating a lake for the loggers' recreation. They bathed and fished, and the few who knew how, swam. In winter, when the waters froze, they played hockey and curling.

Each morning we had hotcakes for breakfast. It was a ritual the men adored. Half a dozen of them would strap bacon fat to their feet and skate around the skillet, careful to avoid the batter, which was coming out of full size concrete mixers with stainless steel flumes ten feet above their heads. I heard stories of skaters who'd fallen and been cooked up with the batter, dark-skinned men who'd been mistaken for raisins, light-skinned ones, for blanched almonds. Nothing like that happened while I was there. Paul was sensitive to the reports of cannibalism and kept careful track of the skaters. If one fell, he'd quickly pluck him up, and if there'd been a skillet burn, he'd rub it with that same bacon fat they had on their feet. And that man would be offered the day off, though none of them ever took it for fear of being accused a sissy.

After we had our fill of hotcakes, Babe would be led in and allowed to eat what was left. One morning I saw him sweep up ten stacks with a single swipe of his tongue, each stack the size of a silo. It took him less than a minute to stuff it all in his mouth, swallow it down and bellow for more. It was a bone-shattering sound. When it came to hotcakes, the Babe was not to be denied.

"They'll be the death of him," said Paul. "But I don't have the heart to say no."

"I'm not sure he'd listen."

"He's quite reasonable about everything else. Works straight through from dawn to dusk. As many days as I ask. Never complains. Which makes it hard to deny him his one weakness. I feel caught. Too lenient if I let him eat, too strict if I don't."

"It's nice you care," I said. "But look. It's his choice. You're not responsible for what he does."

Paul looked at me as if I were crazy, and maybe I was. On the other hand, maybe I was just ahead of my time.

"Don't let him victimize you," I said.

His incredulity increased, then all at once he leaned over and cupped his hand over his mouth.

"He can't," he whispered, as though letting me in on a big secret.

"He's an ox."

THE MEN IN THE CAMP worked in shifts around the clock, but as a rule Paul didn't get started until after breakfast. But once he did, he was unstoppable. I saw him log the entire side of a mountain in a single morning, strip the trees, dress them and have them staged to be hauled out by lunch. He carried a double-bladed ax that allowed him to chop two trees at once, and when he got going, he could fell a whole stand in the time it took for the first tree to hit the ground. He was a furious worker, with a wild spirit and a love for people. In response, people loved Paul, and they came from all over to work for him.

But he had a quiet side too, and a need for solitude. One evening the two of us took a walk over the ridge above camp and down into the next valley. The meadows were lush with lupine and Indian paintbrush. There was aspen and spruce and a lazy stream that flowed without a sound. We built a fire and gazed at the sky, which that far north dimmed but never completely darkened, so that only the brightest stars were visible. We shared our dreams. Being twenty-one, mine was to taste life. Paul's was more specific.

"I want to fall in love," he said.

I laughed, but he was serious. And wistful. And uncertain that he ever could.

To my mind he already had. "You have a vision," I told him. "To tame nature, but with a spirit that refuses to be tamed. You do love. You love freedom. You love life."

"I want to love a man."

Timidly, his eyes sought mine. I could see how desperately his heart wanted to open. I was twenty-one and eager for experience. To put it another way, I was a rebel even against myself.

It was the first time I ever had sex with a man. Obviously, some things were beyond my capability. Afterwards, we joked about it. He called me

little tiger and revealed how much he had always liked little people. His parents were small, as was his older sister. At first they thought Paul had a glandular condition and took him to prominent doctors and specialists who prescribed various nostrums, all to no avail. They tried a Penobscot medicine man, who diagnosed possession by a powerful spirit and performed a day-long ceremony designed either to rid or to honor this spirit, they were never quite sure which. After that they gave up and just let the boy grow, which he did with a vengeance. By six months he required a cradle the size of a ship; by twelve he was plucking up full-grown trees and tossing them in the air like match sticks. His parents did their best to keep him out of trouble, but he had a spirit that couldn't be harnessed. They had to move frequently, and by the time Paul reached adolescence, they'd had enough. Unwilling and unable to control him any longer, his parents abandoned him in the forests of the Upper Peninsula, a deprivation to which he attributed his craving to love and be loved. There were four Great Lakes at that time. Paul's tears made the fifth.

Our meeting one another was one of those rare instances of two people's paths happening to cross at just the right time. We came together with equal passion, equal need, and an equal degree of commitment. It was intense, satisfying and brief. Paul told me his deepest secrets and I told him mine. Three days later we parted company, promising to see each other again as soon as possible. Twenty years passed before we did.

Again it was summer. I had recently separated from my wife. This was not my college sweetheart, the one who'd gone to New York to fight the beast and topple the patriarchy, although we had been married briefly. This was the woman I had met after law school. She was coming out of a bad relationship at the time, a burn and destroy affair with another woman, and was ready to try something new. I was new, and we did famously for eight years, therapy for five, and now we were trying separation. It was her idea, and I was having a lot of trouble adjusting. A friend suggested I get away, and the first place I thought of, or the first person, was Paul.

I took a plane to Wenatchee, picked up supplies and a car, then drove to Carlton. The town had grown. With the opening of the North Cascades

Highway there were all sorts of new development. I saw no sign and heard no mention of Paul, and it crossed my mind that, despite his fondness for little people, this influx of commerce would not be to his liking. But I had a premonition that he'd be at that waterfall where we first met, a vague and vain idea that our lives were somehow running in parallel, that I would be on his mind as much as he was now on mine. It was a sixties kind of notion. Unfortunately, this was the nineties. He was not there, and he didn't come. I waited three days, then left.

I drove back to Wenatchee, turned in the car and took a plane to Seattle. From there I headed north, on successively smaller planes, ultimately commandeering a four-seater Piper Cherokee that dropped me in the town of Ross River, a few hundred miles south of the Arctic Circle in the Yukon. This was the vicinity of Paul's old camp, up in the Selwyn Range to the east, and here I heard mention of him, a whisper really, not much more. But a whisper was all I needed. The next day I was on my way.

It was August, and this was north. The days stretched on forever. I wandered in twilight, caught glimpses of moose and bear, fox on the run, geese in migration. I saw mountains decked in snow and a sky that shimmered with magnetism and light. But no Paul. His camp was empty and by the looks of it had been for years. The skillet that had cost old man Carnegie a year's output of steel was warped and covered with debris. The pen where Babe had slept was down, the field now overgrown with trees. I pitched my camp beside the creek he used to dam for the men and cooked myself meals of desiccated sausage and freeze-dried eggs, all the while dreaming of hotcakes swimming in maple syrup. I took day hikes, resigning myself to the fact that this past, like my marriage, was over.

Then one day in a snowfield I saw footprints. Boot shaped, waist-deep, as long and wide as a wagon. That evening I found him.

He was sitting by a lake in a talus-sloped basin above tree line, absently tossing stones the size of tires into the water. The evening chill that had me in parka and mittens didn't seem to be affecting him. He was wearing what he always wore, though not in the way he always wore it. He was unkempt, his shirttails out, his boots untied. One of the legs of his pants was torn, and his beard, which I remembered as being neatly trimmed, was scraggly and matted.

The trail passed through scree, and the sound of shifting rock announced my arrival while I was still high above the lake. He looked up and frowned, as though unhappy at being disturbed. When he recognized who it was, the frown turned to a kind of puzzlement. He could have helped me down, but instead, he waited while I descended on my own.

It was a thrill to see him again. He said the same about me. But after the first flush of excitement our conversation lapsed. He seemed listless and preoccupied. I mentioned I'd been by the old camp.

"I saw you," he said.

"You saw me? When?"

"A couple of days ago."

My blood rose. "I've been looking for you nearly two weeks."

If this bothered him, he gave no indication of it. "I haven't been in the mood for people."

"What does that mean?"

"I'm depressed."

"You? C'mon. You're a moyer. A shaker. You're a dreamer. You're the opposite of depressed."

"The world is leaving me. Everything I've ever loved is gone."

Gradually it came out. The logging industry had been in a prolonged slump. Demand for timber was a fraction of what it had been. And most of the first-growth forests were gone, and the livable land cleared. Paul couldn't support a camp, and one by one the boys had left. Ole the Blacksmith, Slim Mullins, Blue-Nose Parker, Batiste Joe—all the old gang were gone. And then one day Babe had died. It was the hotcakes, just as Paul had always feared.

"He had an eating disorder. That's what the vet said. And I said all right, an eating disorder, so tell me what to do. But he didn't know, he'd never seen an ox like that.

"It got to be harder and harder to control him. The smell of me mixing the batter was enough to drive him crazy. One day he broke out of his pen and rushed the kitchen. The hotcakes were still in the oven, and he swallowed the whole thing at once, oven, burners, smokestack. Everything. Stupid ox. He burned to death, from the inside out."

"That's awful."

"Saddest day of my life," said Paul.

"When did this happen?"

"A year ago. Maybe two."

"Did you have someone to talk to? Someone to help you through?"

He looked at me with woebegotten eyes. "Did. Then he died too."

Randy was his name. They were lovers, and Paul nursed him to his dying day. Buried him deep and built a mountain on top for a grave stone. It was less than a year since he'd passed away.

"Seems like yesterday," said Paul.

"I'm so sorry."

He sighed. "I keep wondering who's going to bury me."

"You planning on dying?"

"I dream of it sometimes. Is dreaming planning? You tell me."

A couple of years before, I'd had a bout of depression that responded nicely to a short course of Prozac. Fleeting, I wondered how many truckloads of pills it would take to help Paul. I could hear the outcry from all those deprived by him of their precious drug, which made me weigh in my mind the good of the one against the good of the many, a quandary made all the more difficult by the one in this case having dedicated his whole life to the many. My brain was too weak to solve that riddle, and fortunately, Paul interrupted my attempt.

"I don't grow old the same as you," he said. "It may be a thousand years before I die. It may be never."

"Everyone dies."

"I'm as good as dead now. That's how I feel. The rivers are cut. The forests are logged. My friends are gone. Who needs me now?"

"I do," I said. "I need you."

He gave me a skeptical look. "You're being nice."

"I'm being honest. My wife left me. I know what it's like to feel unwanted and unloved."

Granted, my loss paled beside his own, but misery is misery and I needed to talk. It was all he could do to listen. His attention kept wandering, drawn inward by a self-absorption that, frankly, offended me. Talking to Paul was like talking to a pit, and finally, I gave up.

The silence of the high country took over, normally a vast and soul-inspiring event. But neither of us was getting much inspiration. Paul was hopelessly withdrawn, and I felt angry at being cheated of my fair share of

attention. I suggested, in lieu of conversation, a walk. Reluctantly, he agreed.

I had in mind a short stroll, something to stretch the legs and stir the blood, a constitutional. We ended up on a three-day trek to the Arctic Circle and back. Most of the time I rode on his shoulders, which he said made him feel useful. The scenery was magnificent, the land utterly uninhabited. We had snow and wind and skies the color of gemstones. I thought frequently of my wife and the early years of our relationship. I missed her. The vast and untrammelled beauty in that deserted land made my heart ache to have her back.

Paul seemed happy enough to be on the move, but when we returned, his spirits again plummeted. I stayed with him a day or two more, listening to his troubles, stifling my own, growing resentful while trying to appear otherwise. Eventually, I couldn't stand it anymore.

"I have to get back," I told him.

He nodded morosely, then gave me a penetrating look. "Why did you come?"

It was the first genuine interest he had shown in me since I arrived.

"To see you," I answered.

"Why?"

I thought about it. "I had an urge," I said at length, flashing a smile. "Remember urges?"

"I do. Yes. Vividly."

He gave me a look, beseeching maybe, and then fell silent. As the silence grew, I began to feel defensive.

"I didn't come to replay the past, if that's what you're asking." I hesitated. "I'm not gay, Paul."

"Is that why you came? To tell me that?"

This irritated me. "I came because I needed a friend."

He seemed to find this amusing. "And have I been?"

"It's been a rough time for you. I understand. Yes. Of course you've been a friend."

"Of course." He made a parody of the words. "Just so you know, you haven't. Not at all. You're patronizing and self-serving. You breeze in at your whim, then you breeze out. You don't care." He made a motion with his hand of sweeping me away. "Go away, little man. Enjoy your little life

and your little troubles. Your little country. Go away and do me the pleasure of not coming back."

THAT WAS '91. It was the culmination of a bad stretch of time. Two years before, I had turned forty and Sheila, my wife, forty-one. We had put off having a family because that's what our generation did, put off certain commitments in order to indulge others. We traveled. We became enlightened. We fought injustice. We didn't have children because we were children, children of the new age. And then when we were ready, we couldn't. The equipment just wasn't up to snuff. Sperm without heads, ovaries without eggs. It was pathetic. We'd grown old before we'd even grown up.

We went to doctors. Took tests, hormones, injections. Tried the turkey baster, the baking soda douche, the upside-down post-coital maneuver. We charted temperature and checked mucus, fucked on schedule and the rest of the time not at all. Were we having fun? Sure we were. And just to emphasize the point, we upped our therapy to three times a week.

And those, believe it or not, were the good times. The bad started after we visited the baby broker. Met her in an unfurnished tract home on an empty street in a white bread suburb of Sacramento. Our hopes were high, but one look told us it was all wrong. She was a right-to-lifer, smug and self-possessed. She marched outside abortion clinics and hurled insults while on the side she gave Christian guidance to unwed mothers. She had a photo album of all the children she had placed and showed it to us like a lady selling Tupperware. Beautiful babies with angelic faces, flawless parents with milky complexions and award-winning smiles. She advised us to print up a thousand leaflets and pass them out in parking lots. Stand on street corners with placards announcing our need. Beg for babies.

She told us, in essence, that we were to blame for our childlessness and if the Lord willed us to be parents, then and only then would we be. It just wasn't our thing.

We paid her her two hundred dollars, then went home and puked. Two months later, Sheila moved out.

The shock of it sent me reeling, as though gravity had suddenly ceased. I cried on and off for weeks, couldn't get a purchase on things, felt

disoriented and wracked by a sense of guilt, failure, and self-doubt. In retrospect, that had been my purpose in visiting Paul, to restore some degree of proportion and balance to my life. He was, if nothing else, a man with his head on his shoulders and his feet on the ground. Mr. Dependable, the quintessential pragmatist. Or so I thought. When he turned out to be such a downer, when he gave me nothing, when in the end he accused me of being a fraud, I felt betrayed.

On my return from that ill-conceived trip, I threw myself into work, which at the time was malpractice litigation. Perhaps in reaction to being hurt myself, first by Sheila, then Paul, I went after those hospitals and doctors who had hurt others. That most of these injuries were unintentional was beside the point. Errors are errors, and in matters of law it makes no difference that all of us are guilty. I sued on behalf of a woman who'd lost her baby at birth, a man who'd lost an eye, a teenager with brain damage after being struck in the head by the plaintiff, his father. We got a huge settlement for that one, and a few months later we got a fat check in a sexual impropriety verdict against a surgeon who'd been fondling his anesthetized patients. That case made the newspapers, and my wife, who at the time was teaching a course on sexual harassment at the local community college, called to offer her congratulations. It was a little more than a year since we had separated, an anniversary that we had diligently failed to observe. That date now safely past, we felt capable of meeting for dinner. Sheila, I have to say, was ravishing. Evidently, she thought the same of me. We couldn't keep our hands to ourselves, nor our laughter, nor delight. One thing led to another, and we ended up spending the night together. Three weeks later she called to say she was pregnant.

Now we have a two-year old son. He's got the build of an ox and the temperament, alternately, of a rabbit and a mule. Lately, he's been constructing tall and elaborate towers of blocks that he subsequently reduces to rubble with a kick. In other games he is equally omnipotent, digging a hole in the sandbox, for example, which he then fills with water and proclaims an ocean, before draining it completely a minute later and naming it, triumphantly, a desert.

Paul was once like that, making lakes with his footsteps, straightening rivers with a tug of his massive arms, causing tidal waves when he sneezed. A creator and a destroyer. I've been thinking of him a lot lately.

The anger and hurt I felt after that last visit lessened with time, and as sometimes happens, my feelings actually reversed themselves, so that I started to blame myself and not him for being insensitive and unsympathetic. Now, with a good marriage, a happy child, a successful job — in short, with everything going my way, I felt I could brave whatever resentment he might still harbor toward me. I wanted to make peace.

This time I called first. Got the phone number of the Ross River post office and asked the postmaster, who'd lived there his whole life, if he'd had wind of Paul. He hadn't, not in a year or two. He told me to try farther north, up around Mayo, but instead I called Carlton, where, after getting nowhere with one lackey after another, I ended up talking to the head of the Chamber of Commerce. He knew nothing of Paul, although he had heard reports, strictly off the record, of some sort of creature on the loose. A Bigfoot, the locals were saying, which he discounted as a hopelessly crass ploy by the environmentalist cabal to keep the latest ski resort from being built. Bigfoot, he explained, had been listed by some joker in the state senate as an endangered species. It was a pretext to stymie development. What had happened could have been the result of almost anything.

I asked what he was talking about.

"Oh," he said off-handedly. "A thirty-foot anchoring tower disappeared from the top of one of our mountains the other day. Reappeared the next day in the same spot, but upside down."

That sounded promising. I asked if he had any theories.

"It's been a heavy winter." There was a pause on the line. "You one of those ecology nuts?"

"I'm looking for my friend," I assured him. "It's strictly personal."

There was another pause, as if he were calculating whether my actually finding this person would be to the Chamber's benefit or not. Apparently, he decided it would be, because he told me by all means to come up and have a look.

That was in May. In July I took a week off work, promising Sheila to be careful and my son Jonah to bring back a present, and headed to the mountains west of Carlton and north of Lake Chelan.

It had, indeed, been a heavy winter. There was still snow across many of the trails, and the streams and rivers were running full. Penstemon and buttercup bloomed in the meadows, and the young trees looked plump

and green. I made camp the first night near the base of a burnt-out pine and the next day hiked to the waterfall. There was a level spot about fifty feet from the water's edge where I pitched my tent, laid out my bedroll and promptly fell asleep.

When I woke, Paul was standing in the pool. He was facing upstream, so that I saw him in profile. It was truly a shock.

His arms, once so massive, were the size of twigs, his legs, barely as big as saplings. His beard was moth-eaten, his skin, blotchy and pale. He splashed some water on his naked chest and neck, then cupped his hands to get a drink from the waterfall itself. But he lacked the strength, so that the force of the water kept pushing his arms away. He tried again and again, and then for a minute he seemed to forget what he was doing. When he remembered, he sank to his knees and drank directly from the pool. Then he crawled onto the shore, at which point he caught sight of me.

His eyes narrowed, then he quickly tried to cover his naked body with his hands. Just as quickly, I turned away to give him his privacy.

When he had dressed, he told me I could turn around. I apologized for taking him by surprise.

He gave a little shrug. "It's all right. I expect I'm quite a sight."

I found myself nodding. "What's happened to you?"

"Clothes don't fit too well, do they?" Grinning, he hitched up his suspenders. "Good thing I don't wear a belt. My pants would be down by my ankles. Then where would I be?"

It was a feeble attempt at humor and took more breath than he had. Several seconds passed before he got it back.

"What was I saying?"

"Your pants..."

He glanced at them and brushed away some dirt. Then he looked at me. "I'm dying."

"That's ridiculous. You can't die."

He pointed to a purple lump on his arm as big as a grapefruit. And another under his beard. "They're all over. It's how my lover died. Now I will too."

This was unacceptable to me. "Have you been to doctors? Have you seen anyone for this?"

"What would they do? Give me medicine? I know about that. It's in

short supply as it is. And besides, I don't mind dying. I've been alive long enough. Longer than I care to be."

"Legends don't die," I stammered.

He smiled, a look less of the sun as it used to be and more now of the moon. A reflective smile. A sad, sweet one.

"It's too cold for me up north. That's why I'm here. Stay with me. Will you?"

I couldn't refuse. And am forever glad that I didn't. I stayed with him more than a week, almost two, sending word to Sheila through a passing hiker that I'd be delayed. After a few days, we moved to the high country, which was deserted. Paul was forgetful but otherwise remarkably gay, an effect, I suppose, of the illness, although I couldn't ignore the other truth, which was that he had lived his life and now was ready, even eager, to die. He was also weak as a kitten, and one morning he fell while we were traversing a snow field and ended up sliding down the icy slope into a glacial lake at the bottom. He laughed at his ineptitude, but the next day he developed a cough. The following morning it was worse, and by that evening he could barely breathe.

We were in the drainage of a semicircle of tall peaks, at the foot of which was a meadow fed by snowmelt. He dragged himself there, then collapsed, face up, eyes closed. Between labored breaths, he asked to be cremated, his ashes scattered. He whispered something else I didn't hear, then fell silent.

I made a pallet by his head and to pass the time told him stories, tales of Paul Bunyan and Babe, the Blue Ox, how they plowed the land into valleys and rivers, moved the mountains and logged the forests. I told him the story of the Blue Winter, and the popcorn blizzard that froze the cattle. And the one about the killer bees, and the carving of Puget Sound. Some time later he opened his eyes.

"*I have* loved," he said, with emphasis on the have, as though he were debating some point, or answering a question. And then he died.

It took me two days to gather enough wood for the pyre. The blaze lit the sky. And his ashes, when they cooled, made such a pile that to scatter them took two days and a wind out of Heaven, and as far away as Spokane the sky turned dark and people spoke of a new volcano, though no one ever found a trace. ¶



FORGOTTEN TREASURES

MIKE RESNICK

THIS COLUMN'S stated purpose is to direct you to some wonderful science fiction and fantasy books that had low-priced paperback editions and shouldn't cost an arm and a leg when you find them. But let me expand upon that just a bit further.

I frequently find myself in Orlando for a variety of reasons, and from time to time I stop by the MGM/Disney theme park. It's always fun and frequently fascinating, but when twilight comes, I have no urge to remain there, or to return the next day. No, what I want to do is drive to the nearest Blockbuster store and rent the entire Classics section.

I don't want this column to make you want to read more such columns. What I'd like it to do is make you want to (selectively) buy out the Dealer's Room at the next Worldcon.

I suppose there are nobler purposes, but I can't seem to think of one.

...

If you were to ask me to name the single greatest science fiction novel of all time, I don't think I'd be able to do so — but if you were to ask me to name the single most *important* science fiction novel of all time, then Olaf Stapledon's *Star Maker* wins in a walk. I would imagine that 95percent of all science fiction writers since 1937 have, knowingly or (usually) unknowingly, cribbed from it...for never was a book so laden with science fictional concepts.

Star Maker is nothing less than the history of this and every other universe from the beginning to the end of Time — which is a mighty tall order, even when you are Olaf Stapledon, whose first excursion into science fiction produced *Last and First Men*, a novel that covers the comparatively minor story of the next eighteen evolutions of Man until the death of the race.

Now, no one ever accused Stapledon of being a prose stylist,

and sometimes the going gets a little turgid—but stick with it, and when you're finished you'll wonder how one man managed to put so many concepts into a single manuscript.

For as long as people have been asking me about *All Judgment Fled*, by James White (author of the famed and beloved Sector General series), I have been explaining that it is *Rendezvous with Rama* done right.

Consider:

In *Rama*, a strange construct of alien origin enters our solar system. In *All Judgment Fled*, a strange construct of alien origin enters our solar system.

In *Rama*, some carefully chosen men fly out to examine it. In *All Judgment Fled*, some carefully chosen men fly out to examine it.

In *Rama*, the men are presented with a series of puzzles. In *All Judgment Fled*, the men are presented with a series of puzzles.

And there the similarities end, because James White solves the puzzles he presents, fairly and logically and dramatically—and you don't have to wait for the (nonexistent) sequels to find out what those solutions happen to be.

Humor is in short supply these days. This wasn't always the case.

The first few decades of this century saw a goodly number of popular humorists, ranging from Damon Runyon to Dorothy Parker to Robert Benchley. But the funniest of them all was Thorne Smith, who just happened to be a fantasy writer as well.

Smith's very worst books—*Topper*, *Topper Takes a Trip*, and *The Passionate Witch*—were all turned into rather mediocre movies, and *Topper* became a slightly-less-than-mediocre television series. His best books—*Skin and Bones* (about a man who becomes a skeleton), *The Glorious Pool* (about a swimming pool that gives eternal youth), *The Night Life of the Gods* (in which the Roman gods come bawdily to life)—were too bizarre and too risqué to be of any interest to Hollywood.

Probably the funniest of them all is *Rain in the Doorway*, which saw three paperback editions from the 1940s through the 1980s. It concerns a totally repressed, mild-mannered businessman, Hector Owen—the typical Smith protagonist—who wanders into the most unusual department store anyone ever saw. There are three totally mad partners, a love interest named Satin who manages the pornography department, an eel, a whale, a meet-

ing of the Kiarians (who are just like the Kiwanees and the Rotarians, only more so), the wildest trial ever set to print, and enough other things to amuse the most jaded of tastes.

While we're on the subject of humor, let me talk to you about Robert E. Howard. Yeah, the same guy who created the totally humorless Conan and Kull and Solomon Kane. The poor guy who went out into the desert at age thirty and blew his brains out right after his mother died. *That* Robert E. Howard.

Funny?

Actually, hilarious.

Let me refer you to the collected tales of one Breckinridge Elkins, a frontiersman with the strength of Babe the Blue Ox and maybe half the brainpower. Or, to describe some action in his own words: "I riz up and taken Joe by the neck and crotch and throwed him through a winder as gentle as I could, but I forgot about the hickory-wood bars which was nailed acrost it to keep the bears out. He took 'em along with him, and that was how he got skint up like he did. I heard Glory let out a scream, and would have hollered out to let her known I was all right, but just as I opened my mouth to do it, John jammed

the butt-end of a table laig into it."

Pure, delightful, bigger-than-life characters fighting and shooting and charming their way across the pages of three books: *A Gent from Bear Creek*, *The Pride of Bear Creek*, and *Mayhem on Bear Creek*. If you tried to buy them in hard-cover — they were all originally published in limited editions by science fiction specialty publisher Donald M. Grant — I suspect you'd have to pay close to \$250.00 for the three. But fortunately, they were all combined in one enormous paperback entitled *Heroes of Bear Creek*.

(Gentle suggestion: don't read them all at once.)

Life is too short to constantly re-read books, even your favorites. There are too many still to be read for the first time.

That said, I must confess that I have read Barry Malzberg's *Herovit's World* half a dozen times, and fully expect to read it a few more times before I die. It's *that* good.

What Barry has done is give the reader an inside view of the science fiction field, how it works and how it fails to work. His protagonist is Jonathan Herovit, a hack writer who is drudging his way through his

92nd "Survey Team" book about space hero Mack Miller, and slowly going crazy in the process. He writes under the pseudonym of Kirk Poland, and he is sure that Kirk Poland, if he actually existed, is the kind of guy who either wouldn't have Herovit's problems, or could solve them with minimal effort.

There comes a point in the narrative when the now-schizoid Herovit cracks and *becomes* Poland...

...and Poland can't handle the problems of Herovit's daily life — and missed deadlines — any better than Herovit can. Poland finds his resentment building. Things like this, he tells himself, wouldn't happen to a hero like Mack Miller.

And, not surprisingly, he cracks again and becomes Mack Miller, space hero and leader of the Survey Team.

Does it help?

Read the book — quite possibly the field's best novel of the 1970s — and find out.

Does every fantasy novel have to have an heroic quest? Must they all have swords, and lords and ladies, and ridiculous archaic English?

Well, there are days when I'm hard-pressed to say No, but then I look at a pair of marvelous debut

novels from the early 1980s — Lisa Goldstein's *The Red Magician*, and Jonathan Carroll's *The Land of Laughs* — and realize that not all fantasy novels have to be Tolkein rip-offs or unillustrated barbarian killer comics.

The Red Magician takes place in a rural Jewish village in Eastern Europe in the days leading up to World War II. It seems to be a battle between the village's rabbi and a red-headed magician who wanders in to warn them of the coming holocaust, but it is in fact a powerfully and beautifully told allegory of good and evil, of change, of growth, and of love. It won an American Book Award, deservedly so, and was like a breath of fresh air in a field where 95 percent of the books are set in a past that never was or on worlds that will never be.

The Land of Laughs was set even closer to home. It's half-fantasy and half-horror (though not, thankfully, of the giggle-maniacally-and-disembowel-them type), and concerns the efforts of the protagonist and his ladyfriend to find one Marshall France, the legendary author of a number of classic children's books, including one that bears the same title as this novel. Slowly, entertainingly, believably, they find out that Marshall France's

books were not works of fiction or fantasy, that the Land of Laughs, and all its bizarre characters, actually exist. One of those rare and wonderful books that makes you continue suspending your disbelief long after you've finished reading it.

The late Jack Finney wrote a lot of novels that sold to Hollywood. Yet to me, the very best book he ever signed his name to was not a novel but a collection of short stories entitled *The Third Level*.

You want to talk about sense of wonder? Here's "Of Missing Persons," a tremendously moving tale that elicits the emotional response John Campbell was trying for when he wrote the classic "Twilight." Here's the title story, "The Third Level," and a story in a similar vein, "Second Chance," which may well have been the precursors of Finney's wildly successful time travel novels. There are such well-remembered stories as "Such Interesting Neighbors," "I'm Scared," and "Quit Zoomin' Those Hands Through the Air."

If you'd like to read the best work of a man whose fiction took him far beyond our ghetto, and one of the few fantasy authors for whom the word *escapism* is not a pejorative, give this one a try.

Cyberpunk's not as new as you might think. Well, let's redefine that a bit, because while the cyber part — men tying into machines — existed back in the 1950s, there were precious few punks in science fiction until the last two decades. And those punks that *did* appear tended to have exceptionally short life spans.

One of the most interesting novels to pre-date the cyberpunks was Daniel F. Galouye's *Simulacron-3* (which you may also find under the title of *Counterfeit World*).

What would you do if you were to find out that you — and your entire world — were simply a computer construct, an electronic analog? Once armed with that knowledge, how could you prevent the operator from turning off the machine in which you existed? Could you escape to the "real" world — and once here, how would you know *this* world didn't also exist inside an even larger computer?

That's the task facing Galouye's hero, and in the thirty-plus years since it first appeared, no one's handled it better.

Yeah, I know, I said in the last column that there was no need to direct you to anything by Asimov

or Heinlein or Clarke, because if you're reading this magazine you certainly know about them.

And if that holds true for that trio of hard science writers, it holds doubly true for Ray Bradbury, perhaps our greatest fantasy writer. So why am I telling you about a Bradbury book?

Because this one is occasionally overlooked, quite possibly because of the title, which doesn't evoke images of Mars, or rockets, or space, or book burning.

But trust me, *Dandelion Wine* is one of the half-dozen most beautiful books of this century, in or out of any definable literary category. It is a moving, joyous, heartwarming evocation of spring, and boyhood, and the Midwest of a simpler, gentler

era, and imagination, and compassion, and a boundless curiosity about all things.

Is it fantasy? In places.

Science fiction? Probably not.

Art? In spades.

If you haven't read Bradbury in a few years—or if you've never read him—pick this up, and see what this man, at the absolute peak of his truly awesome powers, could do with images and words.

That's it until next time. Good luck treasure-hunting—and remember, every one of these books had at least one paperback edition, and should be available for a reasonable price at your local paperback resale shop or the dealers' room at a nearby science fiction convention. ♣



In my editorial, I mentioned that Walter Miller's last novel was about a man's search for faith. Here's the flipside of that quest—a riveting tale of what happens when faith is thrust upon a man incontrovertibly.

*Since she passed on the editor's mantle and taught me the secret handshake, Kris Rusch has been at work on more book projects than I can keep track of, including the forthcoming novels *The Fey: The Resistance* and *Hitler's Angel*. Jerry Oltion's last appearance in these pages, "Abandon in Place," is currently on the Hugo Award ballot. His most recent novel is *Mudd in Your Eye*.*

Deus X

*By Jerry Oltion and
Kristine Kathryn Rusch*

“I KNOW WHERE GOD IS,” Lita told her brother when he came to take her away. “I know why He hasn’t been in touch with humanity for so long.”

Marcus sighed. He hated these conversations and was secretly relieved he wouldn’t have to face any more. Ignoring her greeting, he brushed a stray strand of hair off his forehead — he felt in disarray today — and stepped into her room.

It smelled of incense and unchanged sheets. Her bed was made though, and all her belongings straightened. A row of tiny golden bells extended all the way across the bookshelf above her bed — a bookshelf filled with history books. The tan suitcase he had bought for her when she graduated from college sat on the hardwood floor, her overgrown house plants in a box lid beside it.

She had already packed the suitcase. Marcus checked it to make sure she hadn’t hidden anything forbidden in the bottom, but he found only toiletries and clothing. Light, indoor clothing. Good. She had no delusions about her destination, at least.

"The hacksaw is cleverly disguised as the handle," Lita said as he zipped the suitcase closed again. When he actually looked, she laughed, her high, three-note arpeggio filling the bedroom.

"Very funny," he said, and felt a pang of loss. Once Lita had had a marvelous sense of humor — and moments like this reminded him how much he missed it, how much he missed the closeness they had had. Years ago.

He picked up the bag, grunting once at the weight. Lita followed, the plants cradled like children in her arms.

"They may not let you have those," he said.

"They always allow plants in institutions," she said.

He swallowed, his mouth drier than he wanted it. She sounded calm, almost herself. If Phil weren't waiting downstairs, Marcus might back out — again.

But he couldn't. Not with the campaign heating up. Jimmy Carter's crazy brother had been funny in the '70s, but in the '90s a mayor's crazy sister called his own sanity into question. Besides, Lita had gotten stranger in the last year, and he couldn't control her — or her mouth. And in Wisconsin, people didn't tolerate odd behavior very well, especially from their politicians. He certainly hoped the subject of God would be forgotten for the drive.

He lugged the suitcase past his own room — which had once belonged to their parents, before the plane crash — and down the stairs to the entryway, where his campaign manager waited, nervously jangling the car keys.

"Hello, Phil," Lita said from the top of the stairs. "Have you got the straightjacket ready?"

He reddened. "I, um — "

"She's being a real clown this morning," Marcus said. "Come on, Lita. Your appointment is at ten."

She descended the stairs slowly, the wood creaking beneath her weight. The slanting line of photographs on the wall — their parents' wedding picture, their graduation pictures, and that last family photograph — caught her attention. "Good-bye," she told them as she passed. "Good-bye, good-bye, good-bye." When she got to the bottom of the stairs, Phil opened the front door for her, and she paused to say good-bye to the

entire house. Then on the way to the car she said good-bye to a Mugo pine, and to three people who weren't there.

After a bit of wrangling, Phil and Lita put the plants in the trunk of the gray Oldsmobile along with the suitcase. Lita slid into the back and Marcus sat beside her, his wool suit catching on the fabric upholstery. He missed the BMW and its leather seats, but Phil had told him a mayor should drive an American car. Marcus hadn't actually driven it much; Phil usually did all that while Marcus read his reports and memorized speeches.

"Look out!" Lita gasped when Phil pulled out into the street. He stomped on the brake, jerking them all forward against their safety belts, but there was nothing in front of the car.

"What?" Phil asked.

She shook her head, her long hair catching on her bottom lip. "I keep forgetting. You can't see them. He's out of the way now. Go ahead."

Phil drove on without answering, his back and shoulders rigid. Marcus brushed the hair out of Lita's mouth, and then used the moment to caress her cheek, something he hadn't done since she was a baby.

"We'll get this taken care of, sis. You'll be as good as new in no time."

"That'll be a relief."

"You don't have to get sarcastic."

She laid her hand on his arm. "I wasn't. Not entirely, anyway. It really would be a relief if they'd just go away. They're all so demanding, and they want something I can't give them." The implication was clear, in light of earlier conversations. She thought there was something Marcus could do, if he'd just accept her invisible people as real.

The houses and trees streaming past were a blur beyond the windows. Phil was taking the back route, avoiding the downtown, City Hall, and any nosy reporters. Marcus tried to focus on his sister, but her blue eyes seemed to bore a hole through his own. "I've told you," he said, keeping his voice calm. "I can't see them. There's nothing I can do for them, either."

"How do you know that?"

"Because — " He stopped. *Because you can't help someone who doesn't exist*, he wanted to say, but he had said that over and over already. "Because I've got my hands full just running this city," he said instead.

"Because you're up for re-election, and you can't be seen talking to

people who aren't there," she amended with the tone of a child who had heard the sentence many times.

"That too."

They rode in silence past the lake, and to the dangerous unmarked intersection Councilman Seals had been nagging him about. The car merged into eastside traffic, past his baby — the industrial park still under construction. He supposed he would have to find some funding for that intersection before the three electronics firms opened their doors, and brought in the promised thousand jobs.

Phil turned the car on a side road and followed its twisty path until they reached the tasteful sandstone gate that hid the lawn of the private hospital.

"I know why God has been so silent lately," Lita said again as the huge tan building came into view. Her voice had a touch of desperation and her hands were shaking. "He's been quiet because He's under sedation."



N HOUR OF PAPERWORK LATER, Marcus left the hospital, the institutional stink buried in his clothes. He and Phil said nothing as they got into the car. The whole ordeal had left Marcus's shoulders so tight that he felt as if he would pull a muscle if he turned his head too quickly. He had almost backed out when they didn't allow Lita to bring her plants into her room.

Her voice still rung in his head: *You're going to take my friends away from me. At least let me keep my plants. Please!*

He had reached a compromise with the staff, probably because of his local celebrity status. Her plants remained, in a window she had chosen near the lobby, and if she responded well to treatment they would be moved into her room. She would be allowed to tend them every day, either way.

As they drove through the gate and onto the road, Phil turned to him. "Let me buy you lunch?"

Being in public was the last thing Marcus wanted, but it was something he could no longer avoid. The campaign was heating up — and with Jim Sorenson entering the race, Marcus no longer had the free ride he had once had. Sorenson had been mayor of the city almost twenty years before,

a young radical elected toward the end of the Vietnam era. He had received national press coverage, being the youngest mayor of a major U.S. city, and the aging former hippies — who were all heavy voters — remembered Sorenson's tenure with fondness.

"Lunch sounds good," Marcus said, "but let's stay away from City Hall."

Phil drove to an eastside diner that still had the original vinyl on the booths, and authentic fifties swirling counter stools. The hostess greeted Phil with a smile and, without asking, led him and Marcus to a table in the near-empty back room.

"Favorite of yours?" Marcus asked.

"Mmmm hmm," Phil said. "They do a great hot turkey sandwich."

So Marcus ordered a hot turkey sandwich, and an ice tea when he realized the diner didn't serve beer. Wily fellow, Phil. He knew better than to let Marcus drink on a Wednesday afternoon.

Phil looked like he could have used a drink himself, though. He had been visibly unnerved in the lounge when a small woman had walked up to him, handed him a pile of polished rocks, and walked away. He had set the rocks on a table and hurried to Marcus's side, for the first time in Marcus's memory seeking advice and protection rather than offering it.

"I hate leaving her there," Marcus said. "Maybe I should have hired someone to care for her at home."

Phil shook his head. "Even if you could afford it, how would you avoid another Channel 6 problem?"

Marcus took a sip of his ice water. A reporter from Channel 6 had taken footage of Lita talking with her imaginary friends. Phil had pulled a lot of strings to prevent the story from airing, and the whole incident still bothered him. Marcus, too. He hadn't wanted the footage to air, but manipulating the media was such a Richard Nixon thing to do. If that ever got out, he would be in a lot of trouble, especially in this election.

"I know," he said, not wanting to think about it anymore. He was glad he had a City Council meeting tonight, so he wouldn't have to go home early to an empty house.

Not that going home to Lita had been pleasant. In the last three months, she had been so insistent. She had tried to introduce him to her imaginary people, making up long alliterative names for them, and when

that failed, she had acted as "interpreter." She had even tried sleight of hand to convince him that her friends were moving things around the room. But the night she had asked him to father a baby with one of them was the night he knew he had to get help for her. He was afraid that something had really slipped — and he didn't even want to think about what she might have done if he had humored her and said yes.

He had humored Lita before, and it had only made things worse. It had driven her delusions to another level of complexity, turning her one-time play friends into oppressed refugees who needed her help, and then his.

When the waitress returned, carrying Marcus's sandwich and Phil's chicken-fried steak, Phil let out a sigh that seemed to go on forever. His shoulders relaxed, and his thin, worried grimace slid a little closer to a smile. Marcus knew how he felt. Familiar surroundings. Comfort food. Marcus had used the same tactics many times over the last few months.

He wouldn't have to do that now. He was appalled at how relieved he felt, but both emotions were honest. Now he could bring colleagues home — and dates, if he were so inclined. Now he could concentrate on the campaign and on the city itself.

As if that would do any good. He had been as idealistic as Sorenson when he got into politics, only the '80s were death to idealism, just as government was. For the last two years, he'd had to compromise on every issue just to get his favorite ones passed, and he had come to realize that a man did not change the world by becoming a politician. Eventually politics and the world changed the man. When the last die was cast, all Marcus would ever be was a man who had made some partially successful deals.

He wished he could sit down with his opponent and explain that to him, explain that Sorenson's tenure had been a fluke because the times had been right for it, that no mayor in the 1990s could be a revolutionary too.

The idea was laughable. They were political adversaries, and he'd better not forget that.

"You're awfully quiet," Phil said.

Marcus nodded. "Just trying to adjust my focus," he said.

For the next few weeks, Marcus kept being surprised by the yellow and red leaves fluttering to the ground from the oak and maple trees all

over town. It felt like springtime to him. Lita had responded to medication, and no longer saw her imaginary people. When Marcus visited, they actually held normal, rational conversations. Nearly normal, anyway. She spoke too slowly and the brightness had left her eyes. The drugs didn't affect her memory, so she still spoke of her invisible friends, but time would take care of that. Eventually, she would lose her concern for them, and would replace them with friends from the real world.

Marcus wasn't able to visit her as often as he liked, since the election was only two months away, but he vowed to make it up to her afterward. Now that he was able to concentrate again, things were clicking into place in a way he had forgotten was possible. Sorenson was still giving him trouble, but the man was running on the golden memories of an outmoded era. Phil had found a contemporary statistical analysis of Sorenson's reign, and the analysis showed that Sorenson's idealistic games had put the city into a recession three years before the rest of the country. Much of the work Marcus had done almost fifteen years later was a direct result of the mess Sorenson had made of the city.

The polls after that story broke showed Marcus in the lead. This afternoon he would solidify that lead with copies of reports leaked to him by two major corporations who had decided not to come into the city during the 1970s specifically because of Sorenson's policies. The reports, besides citing Sorenson as the main reason for ignoring the city's bids, also showed that the corporations would have brought five thousand jobs to the area. If Sorenson hadn't been mayor, the city would have gone into an upswing instead of a serious decline. Marcus had been saying that all along, but now he had it in writing.

He grabbed the papers off his cluttered desk and shoved them in his breast pocket. Phil would make sure that the reporters got copies at the end of the press conference, but Marcus liked to have the papers to wave around. He stepped out into the hall, passing two messengers scurrying toward his secretary's desk. The hallway had the dry, dusty odor of recycled air, mixed with the perfumes and colognes of the overdressed people who worked inside. Marcus wondered what it would smell like if Sorenson won the election. Sandalwood, maybe? He remembered how in his college days the hippies had burned sandalwood incense to mask the smell of pot.

The thought made him laugh, and Councilman Seals, a burly man who looked like a used car salesman, tilted his head quizzically as he passed. Marcus didn't bother to explain. He turned left at the wide marble stairs that led to the press rooms in the basement.

Whistling as he took the steps two at a time, he nodded to people in passing. The building was full today — odd, even for a press conference of this importance — and he wondered if this presaged a blow-up on some issue he hadn't been concentrating on.

When he reached the landing, a man in strangely cut clothes — it looked as if he had tucked a navy blue bathrobe into a pair of white and blue striped jodhpurs — tried to stop him, saying in an oddly accented voice, "Mr. Chambers, I need to speak with you in private."

Marcus sidestepped him with practiced ease. "Sorry. I've got a press conference." The man — obviously a Sorenson supporter by the clothing — reached for him, but missed as Marcus danced out of his way. "Come to the conference if you need to talk," Marcus told him, then turned and hurried down the remaining steps.

He heard the reporters before he saw them. The wide hall and vaulted ceiling caught and reflected sound. He recognized the faces in this hallway. All three local television channels were there, as well as all the radio stations. The newspaper reporters, milling near the bust of Thomas Jefferson, saw Marcus first and headed into the audience room. The others followed, and the wide hall was suddenly empty except for the oversized portrait of the city's first mayor and the busts standing on Grecian columns.

Marcus went in the side door behind the fake stage and immediately ran into Phil. "Ready?" Marcus asked. He had to speak loudly because of the babble of the reporters in the main room.

"Ready." Phil was rocking from foot to foot in excitement. "If this works, we should have the network boys at your next conference. They're already calling this a race between the ideals of the sixties and the realities of the nineties. Did you catch CNN this morning?"

"Nope," Marcus said, "but I heard about it from Beverly." In fact, his secretary was telling everyone who came in that their lowly mayoral race was becoming national news. The thing that bothered him was that he was being seen as the slick politician and Sorenson as the idealist. Phil

didn't care, claiming the free publicity was great. But something about it rankled. Damn it, Marcus was an idealist too. He wanted to save the world just as badly as Sorenson did. Marcus just knew the difference between possibility and fantasy.

Phil slipped out behind the thin blue curtain and walked to the podium. A single mike faced him — an innovation from early in Marcus's tenure — placing enough electronics equipment in back that reporters could jack into the sound system instead of tape their mikes to the main one.

The din gradually receded. Phil waited, hands clasped behind his back, until the room was completely quiet, then he thanked everyone for coming and gave a short state-of-the-campaign speech to warm up the crowd. He wound it up after a few minutes and turned over the podium to Marcus.

"Thank you," Marcus said when he reached the podium. Squinting against the harsh glare of the TV lights, he looked out at the room full of reporters in their wooden chairs, notebooks and laptop computers opened like expectant mouths on their laps, and said, deadpan, "You're probably all wondering why I called you here today...." He waited for their laughter, grinned and said, "I've always wanted to use that line, but today it seems especially appropriate. I've just discovered a little piece of information I want to share with everyone."

With that as a teaser, he held back for a couple of minutes, first setting them up with a brief history of the city's economy as it related to the state's and the nation's. Then he cited figures on the way the early recession had affected the individuals in the city — figures which showed a significant decline in all the local businesses, including the state run university, as well as a serious decline in the number of jobs.

When he judged that everyone was properly incensed, he said, "Our office has used these statistics before to show the detrimental effect of Mr. Sorenson's previous tenure on the city. But now we have outside confirmation." Removing the papers from his pocket, he waved them in the air like a flag and dropped his bombshell.

The significance did not escape the reporters. Instead of losing ten thousand jobs in the 1970s, the city would have gained five thousand. Fifteen thousand people would have been employed who were now out of work, and all because of Sorenson.

In the stunned silence that followed, the man he had seen on the stairs stood up, the tassles on his sleeves jingling softly, and said, "Mr. Chambers, I really need to talk with you about your sister. What you've done to her is causing us great concern."

Marcus felt as if he had been hit in the belly. He had been expecting someone to ask about Lita, but not today, not on his afternoon of triumph. He instantly realized the score, though. Sorenson had been saving it for a trump card, in case Marcus managed to tarnish his image. Well, it wouldn't work. Phil had already written a response, which Marcus had memorized. He launched into it now, altering it only enough to fit the current situation.

Focusing intently on the man, he said, "I hardly think having a sister who needs psychiatric treatment compares to the callow disregard of his fellow human beings that my opponent has shown in the pursuit of his ideals. Mr. Sorenson may wish to make a campaign issue out of my decision to seek treatment for her, but I challenge him to show me a better course of action. My sister's condition is being treated by trained professionals, which is the only humane way to deal with a situation like hers. Similarly, you should look to a professional to oversee the city government, not an amateur whose anti-business attitude has already cost us thousands of jobs!"

A few of the reporters turned around in their seats to see who he was talking to, then turned back to him with puzzled expressions. Marcus thought furiously. Was he missing something here? Was this guy somebody he should know? Maybe a local hero? He looked at Phil in the wings, who was frantically tugging his left earlobe, the signal to cut it short.

But he couldn't do that; the conference had hardly gotten started. If he bailed out now, the whole thing would be a fiasco. The only way to fix it would be to find out what was going on, and hope he could patch things up once he understood.

The reporters burst into a babble of questions, but Marcus ignored them all and said to the man in the robe and jodhpurs, "I get the feeling I should know you. What's your name?"

The man took a step forward. "I am Kardalkeddy Ez Hakon. Your sister said you couldn't see me, but fortunately, she was wrong."

Marcus sat on his leather swivel chair, his feet propped up on his cluttered oak desk. Through the window below, he had a clear view of the press entrance. Reporters were standing in front of cameras, giving special reports. Others had hurried to their cars and driven away. A few, he knew, were plugged into the phones downstairs, transmitting their stories directly to the city desk.

And probably not the story he wanted them to tell. He rubbed the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger. A headache was building behind his eyes. He had to wait until everyone was gone before he could even try to go home.

The door to his office burst open, and Phil scurried in. His jacket was askew. Beads of sweat covered his brick-red forehead. "What the hell was that?" he snapped.

"I saw someone there," Marcus said, deciding to leave out the bit about the strange clothes. "He asked me about Lita."

"Yeah, right." Phil ran a hand through his stylish blunt cut. "And the ghost of FDR was hovering over us all, giving his blessing to the campaign." He grabbed Marcus's ankles and pushed them off the desk. "Thank god the cameras were all pointed at you. No one can prove you were talking to thin air, but you can bet your ass Channel 6 is going to haul out that footage of Lita. What the hell were you thinking?"

Marcus sat up. "I tell you, Phil, there was a man there. Long-haired guy with a funny accent. He must have ducked out as soon as he asked the question." Even as he spoke, Marcus knew that wasn't what happened. But he was into full damage control now; any explanation that fit the facts was better than none. "I mean, what better way to make the mayor look bad than to have him talking to the air like his crazy sister?"

Phil sighed and turned away. "I already thought of that. In fact, I already said as much downstairs." He turned back to Marcus, his expression already hardening with resolve. "That's our story, and we stick to it. We also prevent another looney from coming in again. We need security at these things. No more open conferences. We do the Reagan thing and make everyone sign in and get assigned seats, okay?"

"Okay," Marcus said.

"And I will handle this. You will make no comment on it at all. Understood?"

"Yes." Marcus gripped his hands together. He hated this kind of control, had fought it for years. But because of this one — serious — blunder, he had to give in to Phil.

"We have to make these reporters look like idiots, suckered into believing this kind of story. That means an incredulous laugh whenever anyone mentions it, and nothing else. We'll beat this bastard through sheer denial." Phil adjusted his suit, then pushed the knot of his tie against his throat. "God, we should have been prepared for this kind of end run. I never thought Sorenson had it in him."

Marcus swallowed heavily, keeping his expression impassive. Phil turned, looking neater, but his hair still stuck out in all directions.

"You realize what this means, don't you?" Phil asked. "It means the campaign has just gotten very dirty."

THE HOUSE had never looked so inviting. Marcus let himself in through the garage, closing the door with the remote before he stepped out of the car so he wouldn't have to face the reporters camped out on the front lawn.

He made a show of shutting the drapes, and unplugged the ringing telephones in each room while he was there. When the entire house was secure and silent, he went into the kitchen where he warmed up a can of soup and made himself a roast beef sandwich. He pulled a Beck's out of the fridge and sat at the table, his entire body shaking.

Phil had bought it. At least, he was acting like he did. But that didn't solve the problem. What had the admitting nurse asked? *Are there other cases of this type, Mr. Chambers? Sometimes mental health problems run in families.*

Like a disease. And now he had it.

"Excuse me."

The voice made him jump. He stood and whirled, ready to throw the bastard reporter out. But instead, he saw the man in the bathrobe and jodhpurs standing beside the stove.

Marcus sank back into his chair. "Go away," he said. "Just disappear back into the ether where you belong."

"I wish I could, Sidenta," the man said. "But I do need to talk to you." He held his hands above the stove burner, warming them over its residual heat.

"You've already messed up my life. Please leave." Marcus pushed the beer away. He was talking to the imaginary man as if he were real. Just like Lita did.

"I cannot," the man said. "I need your help, Sidenta."

"I don't believe in you."

"I believe in you." The man's voice was shy. He took a step forward, knelt and took Marcus's hand. Marcus pulled away, but not before he had felt the warmth of the man's skin, and the roughness of his calluses.

"I have been trying to speak with your sister," the man said, "but she cannot hear me anymore. I had no choice but to come to you."

"Wonderful."

The man kept his head down as he spoke. In the bright kitchen lights, his hair had an odd greenish tinge. "I am Kardalkeddy Ez Hakon, Traveler Between Worlds. The sacred book of Davon foretold my coming by a thousand generations. It spoke of you, too, Sidenta, and the peace you would bring to our people."

Marcus focused on the man. This vision was convincing. No wonder Lita believed so firmly. All it had taken was twice, and he was getting sucked into the delusion too. She had been seeing them for years. He shook his head to clear it, and said, "Look, I'm not bringing peace to you or anybody else from dreamland, understand? I'm going to close my eyes, and you are going to go where laps go when people stand up. Is that clear?"

The man's bow deepened. "Forgive me, Sidenta, but I choose not to leave. I have a few moments left. I must convince you."

Marcus stubbornly looked away, but out of the corner of his eye he could still see the apparition kneeling beside him. Kardalkeddy moved his arm, and the tassles on his sleeves tinkled with tiny golden bells.

"I don't believe in you," Marcus said again.

"Sidenta," the man said. "Let us not talk of belief. Let us talk of lives, of needs, of obligations. We need you. You could affect the fate of our whole world."

Marcus closed his fist and drew his hand against his side. He didn't understand any of this. "What the hell does 'Sidenta' mean?"

Kardalkeddy touched his forehead, quickly, like a Catholic genuflecting. "It means many things. To some, it means 'leader.' To others, 'lord.' In some of the old texts, it means 'blessed spirit.'"

Marcus got up from the table and carried his beer and his soup to the sink. He poured the beer out, watching it swirling amber around the drain. "Get out," he said.

"Sidenta, please. My power for this day is nearly faded. It is not easy to breach the wall between worlds. Your sister, and now you, are the only people I have been able to reach at all, and if you do not help us I fear there will not be another. Please —"

"Get out," Marcus said firmly. He set the empty beer bottle beside the sink, then leaned forward and rested his head on the cupboards. Maybe he should resign. Maybe he should leave the campaign. Or maybe this was just a fluke, induced by stress. He would get a good night's sleep, and everything would look better in the morning.

When he finally turned around, he was alone in the kitchen. He glanced nervously around, then sighed and stuck his bowl of soup in the microwave, opened the refrigerator, and pulled out a can of Coke. He slipped off his shoes and put them on the front stairs, returning to the kitchen just as the microwave beeper went off. He took the bowl out of the microwave and was halfway back to the table when he stepped on something hard.

"Ow, damn!" he said, setting the bowl down and peering at the floor. There on the varnished hardwood was a tiny blue tassel, complete with bell.

THE NEXT day, following Phil's game plan, Marcus parked himself in his office and didn't budge all day, nor did he respond to the constant barrage of phone messages from the media. He overheard Beverly in the outer office telling each caller the same thing: "I'm sorry, but the mayor is in a meeting. Please give me your name and number and I will have him return your call."

Yeah, right.

The reporters camped out in the front office got the "Do you have an appointment?" treatment, at which Beverly was a master. Marcus smiled when he heard her typing steadily between calls, ignoring the reporters as if they weren't there.

How he envied her that ability. Marcus had tried working, but he couldn't concentrate — and he needed to get things done, on the campaign

and on city business. This disappearance was costing him in more areas than simply his public persona.

The sound of someone clearing his throat brought Marcus out of his reverie. He turned, expecting Phil or Beverly, but he drew in a sharp breath when he saw Kardalkeddy standing just inside the door. He was wearing a different outfit today: a dark blue bodysuit made of fine silky fur. His long hair had been tied in a braid that hung over his left shoulder, and another bell dangled from a blue tassel at the end of the braid.

"Go away," Marcus croaked.

"Thank you for *seeing* me," Kardalkeddy said. "You are a busy man, judging by the size of the crowd in your audience hall."

"That crowd is your fault," Marcus said.

"Is it?" Kardalkeddy pulled out one of the two chairs across the desk from Marcus and sat down. The leather seat creaked under Kardalkeddy's weight. "That is an interesting conundrum, is it not? You do not think I exist, yet you say I am responsible for your problem."

Marcus could think of no response to that, save looking away and trying to focus on the zoning board report on his desk.

Kardalkeddy laughed. "Yes, by all means, continue your work. I am sure it is more pressing than the needs of an entire people."

Marcus's shoulders tensed. He turned the page, but the words blurred. He had never been good at ignoring anyone or anything. It was one of the things that had made him a good politician.

"I know," Kardalkeddy said. "I shall tell you a story. A story of a people who have suffered much for their beliefs. A people who, even now, are dying because they believe they shall be saved." His voice took on a lyrical quality as he warmed to his subject. "They are a good, hard-working lot. They have listened to their god and done all that she has said. But even her council cannot save them. They need a savior, one who is of them and not of them."

Marcus turned another page. His hand was trembling.

"Fortunately," Kardalkeddy said without missing a beat, "the sacred book of Davon foretold of just such a one, who would appear in our time of need. Many other portents have already come to pass. Myself for instance, the Traveler Between Worlds who can see into the next plane of existence, and hunt for our salvation there."

Marcus pushed the report away. "So you're as loony as me, then."

Kardalkeddy shook his head. "When I was a child, my parents thought me possessed. Then they listened, and realized that I spoke with a wisdom no child owned. Others came to believe, and to rely upon my otherworldly advice. Only those who cannot accept reality call me Idiot. They see me speaking to thin air, while balanced on the limb of a tree, and they would chain me with the dogs if not for the value of my words."

Marcus frowned. Kardalkeddy was sitting flat in the chair, his legs spread before him. He didn't look like a man balanced on a tree limb, even if the limb only existed in his imagination.

"This advice — you got it from Lita?"

"Yes, Sidenta. She told us to rotate crops and to burn the fields when they are fallow. She explained how to divert rivers to water our dry land. She told us how to clean meat so that illness will not come to our people. And when the Zetaian came — the conquerors — she taught us how to keep our own way of life alive while pretending to accept theirs."

Marcus sighed. All those books on pre-modern agriculture, the French Resistance, and the history of the religious faithful in Eastern Europe. He had thought Lita was just interested in history.

"The sacred book of Davon said the One would rise up and help us overpower the conquerors. As more and more of us died on the Zetaians' swords, we pleaded with her to help us. She said she would speak with you, Sidenta, but then she disappeared. When I could not talk with her, I came to you. But you do not believe the evidence of your own senses."

Marcus's skin was crawling. He looked Kardalkeddy directly in the eyes. "Not when they tell me things that are flat out impossible."

"How can something be impossible when it happens?"

The question froze Marcus. He sat, unable to respond, when the door opened and Phil walked in. A burst of conversation from the front office entered with him, and muted again when he closed the door.

"How's it going?" Phil asked. He wore his light gray power suit, the one he usually reserved for tough council meetings.

"Fine," Marcus said, shuffling through the zoning report and trying to look busy. He had to get Phil out of the room.

Phil reached for the chair that Kardalkeddy was sitting in, but Kardalkeddy pulled the other one out instead. Phil glanced at Marcus,

obviously not seeing Kardalkeddy at all, then sat in the other chair. He'd evidently figured that Marcus had slid it out with his foot.

Amazing what the mind could rationalize when there was no other explanation.

"Channel 6 won't let go of the crazy mayor story," Phil said, "but Channel 12 bought our version completely. They've been running your footage — which looks good when you assume there's a question — side by side with Sorenson's news conference from this morning. He comes off as a self-centered jerk. Both state papers came out for you, and all three of the talk radio stations."

"Good," Marcus said, not trusting himself to say more.

Kardalkeddy was watching the conversation, his eyes bright.

"Of course, Sorenson has been going after the business with Lita now that you're on the record admitting to her hospitalization, but I think we can beat him on that, too. Play the humanitarian angle."

"Humanitarian. Such a natural role for you, is it not, Sidenta?"

Marcus swallowed, forcing himself to keep his gaze on Phil.

"Fine."

Phil folded his hands across his flat stomach. "We need to give the press something else to talk about. I've been emphasizing the jobs thing, and people are angry about it, but we need to show that you're working to help the community."

"My record should show that," Marcus said.

Kardalkeddy snickered. "Not from this vantage."

"Not enough." Phil tilted his head in that cocky way Marcus hated.

"I figure we need the library renovation."

The library renovation was one of Marcus's long-running battles. He had been arguing for it ever since he had gotten into office, but even though everyone agreed it was necessary, the council could not agree on funding.

"We don't have the votes," Marcus said.

"Votes, Sidenta?"

Phil leaned forward. "We do if we call in a few favors. We won't have to make good until after the election."

"I don't know," Marcus said. "There are still some serious flaws with the proposal. If we pass it now, it'll just come back to haunt us later. I'd

like to give it another run through committee and see if we can't get it right the first time."

Phil shook his head. "We need that vote now, Marcus. We need *news*."

"Interesting." Kardalkeddy studied Marcus as if he were an alien life form. "You need the help of others to make changes in this world. Yet in our world you could save hundreds of thousands of lives with a single act."

Marcus glanced over at him, then back at Phil. Phil hadn't even batted an eye. Kardalkeddy sat beside him, obviously enjoying Marcus's discomfort, and that sight made Marcus boil. To Phil, he said, "All right. You win. Let's make some news."

Kardalkeddy sighed and stood. "You choose books when you can save lives. You are a small man, Sidenta." He reached up and pulled the bell from his braid, then held it over Phil's lap and let go.

The instant the bell left Kardalkeddy's fingers, he disappeared. The bell, however, landed with a soft ding on Phil's leg, then bounced to the floor.

"Where the hell did that come from?" Phil asked, bending over to retrieve it.

"What?" Marcus said innocently. "Oh, that. I must have accidentally knocked it off the desk. Sorry."

Phil looked at him suspiciously for a moment, then handed the bell to Marcus. Marcus held it in his closed fist until Phil left, a hard, cold lump of impossibility digging into his flesh.

"The bell is a talisman," Lita said. She spoke slowly, not at all like the Lita of old. "It helps him transfer between worlds. Without the bell, the transfer is painful for him."

She was sitting at the foot of her bed, her bright yellow blouse and white pants glowing in the evening light filtering through the west-facing window.

Marcus sat in the hard-backed desk chair and breathed deeply, trying to stay calm. "Good," he said. "That's a start, at least. So what can I do to make it impossible?"

Lita stared out the window as if she hadn't heard him.

He rubbed a hand over his face. "Come on, Lita. I need your help here."

She turned her head toward him. Each movement had deliberateness, as if each action had three parts: think, command, execute. "Marcus," she said. "You can't run away from this. There's a whole world over there that needs —"

"Over *where*?" Marcus demanded. Lita withdrew like a turtle into her shell, the way she always did when he raised his voice, but now even that movement was slow. Sometimes he wanted to take her off the drugs so his quirky hyperactive sister would return.

"Sorry," he said, reaching out to touch her arm. "All right. I admit, they're real. At least their effect on us is real. But I don't *care* about some alternate universe. They're screwing up my life in this one, and I want it stopped."

"Then check yourself into the same treatment program you checked me into."

Marcus stared at her, wondering if she was joking. She stared back, her blue eyes dulled, no humor in her expression at all. He had thought of banishing Kardalkeddy with drugs, but that idea had died the moment he saw Lita again. He couldn't face having his mind altered. He had always been that way. The only drug he used was alcohol, and he had only been drunk a few times in his life.

"Of course," she said, misinterpreting his silence. "The famous mayor would not want to jeopardize his career." A slight flush rose in her cheeks as she spoke. She was angry with him. Underneath all the drugs, behind her flat affect, lay anger.

He took a deep breath. "I'm sorry, Lita."

"I'll make you a deal," she said softly.

"What deal?"

She peered at him. "Did Kardalkeddy tell you what he wants from you?"

"Some crap about finding a true 'Sidenta' they could set up as a supreme dictator and run the infidels out of the country. Yeah. Sorry, but that's not my style."

Lita giggled. The sound had an eerie hollow quality. "Marcus, they don't want to *find* a Sidenta. They want to make one."

"Huh?"

She giggled again, and blushed. Even though her movements were slow, this was more like the Lita he loved. "Think about it," she said, her words so soft and slow that he leaned forward as if he could urge the words out with his body language. "We can't visit their world, but Kardalkeddy can visit ours, and he can bring some of his friends with him. If one of them was a woman and if she, well, if she got pregnant here, it would look like an immaculate conception to everyone else. And her baby would have origins in both worlds. He'd be able to draw on knowledge that the rest of Kardalkeddy's people aren't even aware exists. He might even have supernatural abilities."

"Supernatural abilities?" Marcus asked dryly.

"Jesus did. At least they looked like supernatural abilities to us. Maybe for his father's people he was just a normal guy."

Marcus swallowed. She had asked him to do this before, and he had put her here because of it. But now he was seeing the same people.... "Was this your idea or his?"

Lita glanced at him. "It's in their sacred book. The Book of Davon. I've always thought that was an Irish-sounding name. I looked it up, and 'Devin' means — " She frowned, clearly searching her fogged brain for the memory. "'Devin' means 'poet-savant. A poet who puts his higher thoughts into words.' They've got lots of legends about invisible people in Ireland; I'd be willing to bet somebody from our world wrote Kardalkeddy's holy book."

Hah, Marcus thought. Imagine getting your religion from Northern Ireland. Knowing the source didn't help him any, though. He stood up and began pacing the narrow room. The window overlooked the interior garden. So far, Lita's plants remained in the visitor's center, but at least she had this. He shoved his hands in his pockets. "You're serious, aren't you? You really want me to have sex with an invisible woman, to get her pregnant, so she'll bear the local equivalent to the son of God."

"She won't be invisible to you," Lita said. "She'll be as real as Kardalkeddy."

Marcus laughed. "That's a relief."

Lita crossed her arms over her chest. "What's the big problem? You've slept with dozens of women. What's one more?"

"All the women I've slept with were real, that's what."

"Think of it as masturbation, then. Or donating to a sperm bank."

Marcus shook his head. "Lita, it's not that easy."

She shrugged. "Then spend the rest of your life ignoring Kardalkeddy and his pleas. It doesn't matter to me. I can't see him anymore." She glanced up at him and the smile that spread across her face was not friendly. "Or you could always take my drugs."

He shuddered, just a little, before he could hide the reaction. Then he flushed. He had made her this way.

She nodded, as if she had expected that response. "You don't need the drugs," she said softly. "And neither do I. As soon as you father a Sidenta, Kardalkeddy will leave both of us alone."

As Marcus drove away from the hospital, his head felt fuzzy, as if he *had* taken Lita's drugs. He wished that could be a solution, but after seeing what they did to her, he knew they weren't. Even Phil couldn't elect a candidate who acted like a zombie.

But the alternative seemed even worse. Sleep with a phantom? If the press got hold of that, he would be worse than a zombie. He'd be dead. Phil would kill him with his bare hands.

Christ, Phil. Just when Marcus needed to confide in him the most, he had suddenly become an adversary. He had completely taken over the reelection campaign, and while that might keep Marcus in office, he would find his hands tied in his second administration by all the empty promises Phil had made.

Plus he didn't like the fact that Phil was getting cozy with Councilman Seals. Marcus wasn't sure what deals those two were thinking up.

All of these problems plus the bad one, the one he didn't want to face. What if Phil and the doctors were right? What if Lita were crazy? Then Marcus was crazy too. One thing was certain: Lita didn't belong in the hospital any more than he did. If he wasn't willing to check himself in, then he should do everything he could to get her out of there and back home.

Everything? Marcus felt horrified to realize that he was actually considering her "deal." Yet if it would stop the visitations and let them both get back to their normal lives, then it would be worth it. And

compared to what Phil was doing to Marcus's career, the price would be quite small.

That little bit of resolve buoyed him up on the drive home. He pulled into the driveway and noted with satisfaction that the reporters were gone. Phil's manipulation on the library issue had done its job.

Marcus parked the car in the garage and closed the door, then went inside the house. He didn't bother to pull the curtains or unplug the phones this time. He went into his study, put a George Winston CD in the player, and spread out on the leather couch. He would relax for a few minutes, then get back to work. Things had started stacking up on him since he had been so distracted.

"So, Sidenta, have you solved your crisis?"

Marcus jerked upright. Kardalkeddy stood near the open window, the light forming a halo behind his head. He wore the bathrobe and jodhpurs again, and somehow that bit of familiarity made Marcus relax.

"For a true believer, your tone is a bit sarcastic," Marcus said.

Kardalkeddy got down on one knee. "Forgive me, Sidenta, but you do not make it easy to worship you."

Marcus sighed. "Get up."

Kardalkeddy stood. He touched his forehead, then faced Marcus. "As you wish, Sidenta."

Marcus stood up as well, suprised to realize that he was actually glad to see his tormentor again. At least face to face they had a chance to resolve these visitations. "Look," Marcus said, "I am not the kind of guy who needs someone to worship him. If I'm going to help you, I'd rather be your friend."

Sunlight reflected off something in the bushes just outside the window. A camera? Christ, that was all he needed. Marcus leaped toward the window, slammed it shut, and drew the curtains.

Kardalkeddy had not moved. He waited until Marcus was done, then asked softly, "You will help us, Sidenta?"

Marcus looked at the closed curtains, imagined reporters crawling through the bushes like ants, poking their cameras through every crack in the house. He couldn't live with this much longer. "Maybe," he said. "Come on. We've got to talk."

He led Kardalkeddy through the house, up the stairs and into the guest

bathroom. He closed the door, then turned on the shower and the sink. Gesturing for Kardalkeddy to sit on the stool, Marcus took the countertop and said over the rush of water, "I talked to Lita and her story matches everything you've told me so far. Either she and I are crazy in the same way, or you're real."

Kardalkeddy looked around the bathroom in puzzlement, at the tile-lined shower and the light blue enamel walls with the matching blue towels on the rack, then shrugged and said, "I am real, Sidenta."

"And you're destroying my life. Lita says you'll stop if I father a child with one of your women. Is that true?" The words sounded cold and harsh. He had never spoken of intimate things like a deal over city parking garages.

Kardalkeddy rose, his body shrouded in the steam rising from the shower. "We will leave you alone, if that is what you wish."

Marcus swallowed. The room was getting hot. He should have turned the shower on cold. "Yes," he said. "I want you to leave me alone."

Kardalkeddy frowned. "I had hoped for a more enthusiastic Sidenta, but if this is the way it must be, then this is the way it will be. I will bring her to you. At midnight. The start of the new day, when my powers are strongest." He reached out and plucked a bell from his sleeve.

"Wait!"

But Kardalkeddy had already disappeared.

MARCUS SPENT the rest of the evening prowling the house like a caged tiger. With the curtains closed again. He unplugged the phones, too, after calling Phil and promising to come into the office bright and early in the morning. Phil had wanted to come over and discuss another campaign maneuver, but Marcus told him no. He would deal with it in the morning, in the office, after his invisible problems went away.

If they went away. If Kardalkeddy and his world weren't real, then tonight's encounter would not stop anything. It would merely be the jumping-off point for a long descent into madness. But Marcus could see no other choice.

He changed clothes twice, brought out a bottle of expensive cabernet from the basement, then took it back and got a newer, sweeter rosé. He had

no idea what Kardalkeddy's people drank, but rosé was a safer choice for an unknown palate.

He set a fancy table, started to make a few appetizers, then decided to cook a full meal. Most of his experience with seduction had involved meals; it would help calm him down to spend an hour or two eating with the woman before they got down to business.

The lasagne was already in the oven when he realized that a traditional seduction might not work. He had no knowledge of Kardalkeddy's world, except that it seemed more primitive than his. Maybe a well-set table and strange food would frighten the woman.

Marcus finished baking the lasagne anyway, wishing that his imaginary people were more like daydreams, that the woman who would appear in his house would be blonde, buxom and fully versed in 20th century American society.

That made him laugh, remembering an old joke about a blackmail attempt on the Pope. To save the church, the Pope had been forced to make love to a woman, but he had demanded three conditions: that she be blind, so she couldn't see who was doing such a thing to her, that she be deaf for the same reason, and finally that she have big tits.

Marcus laughed again. As trade-offs went, this one was actually not so bad. Then he had a horrible premonition that she would show up, dirty and naked, and expect him to service her then and there. The idea made him shrivel up inside.

At midnight the wine was open and breathing on the table and the lasagne was cooling on the stove. The house smelled of garlic, tomato sauce, and cooked hamburger. Two candles glowed on the table, and Marcus sat in one of the dining room chairs, hands clasped on his lap. He felt like a twelve-year-old boy on his first date: half-worried that she would view him as stupid, and half-worried because he felt stupid already.

With a tinkle of bells, Kardalkeddy appeared. He was alone. He surveyed the table, then nodded.

"Well?" Marcus asked.

"She is frightened," Kardalkeddy said. "She has never known a man before."

"Wonderful." Marcus hadn't thought of that. He stood up. He should

have paid more attention in Sunday School all those years ago. Mary had been a virgin — and a child. God. If this girl was a child, he couldn't do anything. "How old is she?"

"She is a woman full grown. She has been preparing all her life for this moment."

Marcus tried not to groan aloud. All her life? He had always avoided those kind of women before. Maybe he could get out on a technicality. "What do you consider full grown?"

"She has seen twenty-five summers. Is there a problem, Sidenta?"

He hoped to hell their years were as long as his. "No problem," he said. Then he felt his face heat. "Hey, uh, Kardalkeddy, um, how can we guarantee that this will work? I mean, sometimes it takes more than one night. I really don't want to do this for a month."

Kardalkeddy paused for a moment, as if relishing Marcus's discomfort. "We have prepared several women. It is Naralena's fertile time." He sighed. "You will treat her kindly?"

Marcus froze. What the hell kind of question was that? He had always been kind to people — except maybe Kardalkeddy. And Sorenson. And Lita, from Kardalkeddy's perspective.

Marcus closed his eyes. The question was fair. "I will," he said.

"Good."

Marcus opened his eyes in time to see Kardalkeddy bend and reach behind him, as someone would do to help another person up a big step. His hand disappeared at the wrist, only to reappear holding another hand. A woman stepped out of nowhere, as if she were stepping through a doorway from one room to another.

She was not a supermodel. No bikini, no flat belly, no breasts the size of grapefruit. About five foot four, maybe less. Her face was oval-shaped, cheekbones almost flat, her nose small and straight. Her skin, eyes, and hair were the same shade of gold. She wore a black dress that went to her knees, and ankle-high leather boots below that. A gold shawl wrapped around her waist and accented her wide hips. She stayed a half step behind Kardalkeddy, as though he would protect her.

"This is Naralena," he said, peering at Marcus. "Is something the matter? Is she not pleasing to you?"

Marcus's hands were damp. He resisted the urge to wipe them on his

suit. "She's — actually, she's very beautiful. Exotic." Christ, car dealership words. As if she were a Jag instead of a woman.

"Good." Kardalkeddy turned to Naralena. "I will stay if you desire it."

Marcus felt his face flame for the second time. He couldn't do anything with Kardalkeddy around, imaginary or not.

Naralena rescued him. Her wide gaze had not left Marcus's face. She nodded, once. "No. Return for me at dawn." Her voice was soft and husky.

Marcus felt a shiver run down his spine. Dawn. He had never, in all his years of single life, maneuvered this fast. He had always known the woman, at least as an acquaintance. In that moment, he realized that the dinner — the seduction — was not for her. It was for him.

Kardalkeddy pulled loose another bell, set it on the table, and disappeared. Marcus noted that Naralena had a leather chord tied around each wrist and ankle, and a tiny bell dangled from each. That was obviously so she wouldn't disappear when he removed her clothing. They had thought of everything.

Naralena dropped to one knee. "I am honored, Sidenta."

This would not work at all. Marcus bent over and took her hand, helping her up. His movements felt stiff and awkward. He hadn't been like this since he took out Cindy O'Brien in high school. "Please," he said, feeling ridiculous. "I need to be a person to you. Just a regular person. Come into the dining room. I've made us some dinner."

She didn't move, just stood there holding his hand, running the other over his shoulder and down his side. She smelled faintly of cloves and cinnamon.

He smiled at her. "I want you to tell me everything," he said. "About yourself. About your world."

She looked up at him, sideways, glancing at him out of the corner of her eyes. A faint smile played across her lips. An inviting smile. She put her hand on his cheek, then brought his face down to hers, and kissed him lightly.

"We do not have much time," she said in her honeyed voice. "I do not think we should waste it talking."

He wanted to disagree, but she kissed him again, much deeper than before.

And that was all it took.

Marcus crawled out of bed half an hour before dawn. Naralena reached for him, caught the love handles around his waist and pulled him back. He landed on top of her, laughing. They kissed, and he buried himself in her cinnamon scent. "I'm an old man," he said against her throat. "I need breakfast."

"I could eat as well," Naralena said.

Marcus glanced out the window. The sky was beginning to lighten. "Kardalkeddy will be here soon."

The laughter left Naralena's face. "I wish this night would not end."

Marcus stroked her cheek with the back of his hand. "Me, too," he said. He had never expected to feel this way. Something special had happened between them. It hadn't felt like a one-night stand; it had felt as if they had known each other forever.

He got up, slipped on his maroon bathrobe, then padded down the hall to Lita's room and got her fluffy pink robe for Naralena. Together they went downstairs to the kitchen, where Marcus stared for a moment at the cereal boxes, but he was too hungry for cereal. "How's lasagne sound?"

"I do not know what it is," she said, then smiled. "But if you made it for me, I would love to try it."

He pulled the lasagne out of the fridge and cut it, then put the pieces in the microwave. Naralena sat in the breakfast nook while he went into the dining room and retrieved the silverware they hadn't used last night.

He brought the candles and lit them, poured two glasses of orange juice, and then the microwave beeped. He set the plates before them, and sat down to eat. His stomach rumbled. He had taken one bite when Kardalkeddy slipped through the wall.

Kardalkeddy had been frowning as he came in, still wearing his jodhpurs, his hair mussed and deep circles beneath his eyes. He stared at them for a long moment, so long that Naralena held out her plate. "Would you like to break fast? The Sidenta is a good cook."

He glanced from one to the other. "Did you —?"

Marcus nodded quickly. He didn't want to discuss the night with anyone.

But Naralena smiled. "Repeatedly. He is good at that too."

Kardalkeddy's astonished look drew a laugh from Marcus. Despite his

embarrassment, he felt good. It was nice to know that Naralena did as well.

Naralena. He reached across the table and she took his hand. He didn't want her to leave. "I was thinking," Marcus said. "I'd be willing to modify our agreement a bit."

Kardalkeddy pulled up a chair. He glanced at the entwined hands. "Would you."

"That's right," Marcus said. He hadn't discussed this with Naralena. His voice shook a little as he spoke. "If you can keep from showing up at inopportune moments, I'd like to keep in touch with 'Lena here. And the child." He flushed then. He felt as if he were speaking prematurely. There was no guarantee that Naralena was pregnant.

Kardalkeddy looked from Marcus to Naralena, his mouth agape. "How...? What did you...?"

She squeezed Marcus's hand. "He is a much nicer man than you led me to believe. He is tender and caring, and when I told him of our people, he was shocked. You have said nothing, Kardalkeddy, except vague warnings."

Marcus said, "She told me about the Zetain and how they slaughtered her family, and the way life was before they came. Kardalkeddy, you know, if you had just told me about this — "

"It would not have made any difference, Sidenta. You did not listen to me."

Marcus glanced at Naralena. She shrugged.

"Look," he said. "I'm worried about you guys. Life doesn't sound easy there, and if Naralena is pregnant, then it might get worse. And if you're telling me the truth, well, things didn't work out too well for the savior in our world. Personally, I mean." Marcus flushed as he spoke. He still felt a bit odd about all of this.

"His is not likely to be an easy life in ours, either," Kardalkeddy said.

Marcus sighed. "I suspected as much. But a little help from his old man at the right moments might give him a better chance."

"You...are truly generous, Sidenta." Kardalkeddy extended a hand and raised Naralena to her feet. She let go of Marcus's hand reluctantly. "Very well, we will return from time to time, as my powers permit. Being careful not to intrude when it would be awkward."

"I would appreciate that." Marcus stood up and encircled Naralena in his arms. She felt soft and small and fragile. He didn't want her to go back to that world, but he knew she couldn't stay. He kissed her on the forehead, then on the lips. "I'll count the hours," he said.

"And I as well." She leaned against him for a second, then Kardalkeddy cleared his throat.

She stepped away, and Marcus felt the loss of her warmth. Kardalkeddy reached for his sleeve, but Naralena stopped him and untied one of her bracelets instead. She handed it to Marcus, smiled, and let go.

The light seemed to fade from the room. Marcus stood in the suddenly empty kitchen for a moment, then sighed and padded back upstairs to shower and dress for work.

"Would you listen a minute?" Phil slammed his hand flat on the desk, startling Marcus from reliving the night for the hundredth time. "I swear to God, I don't know what's happened to you lately. First you're talking to nothing, and now you're ignoring the whole fucking world. I wish you'd make up your goddamned mind and help me with this fucking campaign."

Marcus tried to remember what Phil had been saying a minute ago. Something about funding for a homeless shelter? He couldn't remember. Everywhere he looked, he saw Naralena's face; every voice was her voice. When Beverly had come into the office earlier that morning with a cup of cinnamon tea in her hand, the aroma had driven him wild. He was glad he'd been sitting behind his desk, or she might have gotten the wrong idea.

Phil already had the wrong idea, though, and it was getting worse every day. In the week since Marcus had spent the night with Naralena, Phil had forced three more legislative time bombs through his office, all in an attempt to keep Marcus in the news. Well, Marcus was getting tired of it. Maybe it was time he said so.

He focused on Phil's bloodshot eyes and said, "You want me to help with this campaign? Then run it with some integrity. You're doing stuff that'd make Nixon blush, and I don't want any part of it. You — "

"That's enough," Phil said.

"No, it's not enough. Not by a long shot. You seem to have forgotten who's working for who around here. Well, listen up. I need you a hell of a lot less than you need me, and for the last week, you've been a definite

liability. You're screwing with my town, and I want it stopped. Do I make myself clear?"

"Clear as ice," Phil said. He got up and strode toward the door, then whirled around and stuck a finger straight at Marcus. "Clear as thin fucking ice, old *pal*." He turned back around, took a second to compose himself, then opened the door and stepped into the outer office.

Marcus's hands trembled when he laid them on his desk. He had never argued with Phil like that before. But Phil had never hounded him like this either. Didn't he see that Marcus had a lot on his mind lately?

The hospital wouldn't release Lita, and no amount of string-pulling would change their mind. Sorenson was still attacking him on every front. And Naralena — why hadn't Kardalkeddy brought her back?

Marcus sighed. He would never have believed he'd be wishing for a supernatural visitation, but here he was, pining over a one-night stand.

No, that wasn't true. He wanted Naralena again, sure, but there was more to it than that. He had touched the burn scars on her back, left when the Zetain burned her home when she was a child. He had heard the stories of the atrocities, felt the calluses on her fingers, wiped the tears from her eyes as she spoke. She had made him believe in her world, truly believe, and that had changed everything. He had a chance to make a real difference there, and not just by providing Earthly genes for their savior. He knew politics; he could probably get them organized enough to overthrow the Zetain invaders before the kid was ten. He could help in ways they would never have dreamed possible, but not without Kardalkeddy to provide the doorway. Where the hell was he?

MARCUS FOUND out three days later. He was in Lita's bedroom, staring at the row of bells on her bookshelf, when he saw a flicker of motion off to his right and Kardalkeddy stepped into existence. Instead of the robe and jodhpurs or the fur suit, the Traveler Between Worlds wore a much-used pair of coarsely woven pants and a ragged shirt. Both were stained black with dirt or worse. It smelled as if Kardalkeddy had been crawling through sewers in them.

"What happened to you?" Marcus asked.

"We were discovered." Kardalkeddy took a staggering step, then sank into the rocking chair beneath the window.

Marcus grabbed his arm. "Naralena? Is she safe?"

"For now. She is among friends. However, we must smuggle her out of the country before she begins to show, for the Zetain have ordered that all pregnant women and babies up to a year of age be killed."

The breath left Marcus's body. "Why?"

Kardalkeddy looked up. "The belief that a savior will come is as powerful a tool in revolution as his actual arrival."

"God." Marcus sat on the bed. "But you don't even know that Naralena is pregnant."

"We know," Kardalkeddy said. "We have given her three tests, all positive."

Marcus didn't want to know the details. For all he knew, Lita had given them EPT boxes before she went to the hospital. He clasped his hands tightly together. Naralena. He closed his eyes, saw the pictures of Sharon Tate from the Manson murder — he had read Bugliosi's book — remembered how the fetus had been ripped —

He opened his eyes. "Smuggle her here," he said. "I'll take care of her."

Kardalkeddy shook his head. "That would not work, Sidenta. I do not have the power to keep her here indefinitely, and even if I did, the child must develop in our world."

Frustration built in Marcus's chest. "How about bringing her here, then taking her back to someplace else?"

Kardalkeddy rubbed his eyes. "That is not possible. To travel in my world, I must also travel here."

Marcus stood, his fists clenched. There had to be something they could do. He couldn't let Naralena flee across some dirty, dangerous foreign land with a gang of cutthroats on her tail. Even if Kardalkeddy could bring her here whenever she was in danger, she would still have to cross every treacherous mile between her home and safety. Unless...

"That's it!" Marcus smacked his fist into his open palm.

"What?" Kardalkeddy asked.

"You bring her here, we pile in the car, and I *drive* you wherever you need to go."

Kardalkeddy's expression brightened. "That...could work," he said softly.

"Of course it'll work. How soon can you be ready?"

"Tomorrow night."

"Midnight again?"

"Yes. That would be best. But — can we meet at your office? It would be much easier to bring her there than here. This place is being watched."

The press? What could that matter to Kardalkeddy? Then Marcus realized Kardalkeddy was talking about *his* side. The Zetain were guarding the site of Kardalkeddy's frequent disappearances. "Sure," Marcus said. "The office is fine."

The next day crawled as if the cosmic clock had been embedded in honey. All except for the few moments when Marcus told Phil he would be out of town for a couple of days. That went way too fast.

"Out of town? For what?" Phil's face flushed a deep red. Marcus could almost see the steam leaking from his ears.

"Personal reasons," Marcus said flatly.

"Personal reasons, my ass," Phil said. "Last week's pep talk notwithstanding, I'm still your campaign manager. If you don't come clean with me, then I can't do my job."

Marcus sighed. He knew Phil was right. But he just wished he could put this campaign on hold until his personal crisis was over. "Okay," he said. "I'm going to jump in the car, drive for a day, find a cheap motel where I can watch *Star Trek* reruns until I've forgotten my own name, then I'm going to drive back home and pick up where I left off. Any problem with that?"

"Any problem with it? Any *problem*? What am I supposed to say? The mayor left town on a whim? And where am I going to say you went? To Illinois on a junket? Canada to do some fishing? Then they'll check up on it and they won't find you. Or they will find you, in a cheap motel. Even if you are alone, they'll crucify you. Remember what they did to Gary Hart?"

"Hart brought that on himself." Marcus ran a hand through his hair. Phil was right. Marcus really did need to come up with a story. Only he couldn't think of one. All he could do was worry about Naralena, and hope

that Kardalkeddy could keep her safe. "The press isn't going to find me, and even if they do, there won't be anything to expose." Marcus grinned. "I guarantee you, there won't be a woman in sight."

"What then, a little boy maybe?"

Marcus felt as if he had been punched. He and Phil had never talked that way to each other before. And this time, Phil was serious. Marcus made himself take a deep breath and count to ten before he spoke. Getting angry at this juncture would be the worst thing he could do. "I'll pretend I didn't hear that, Phil," he said as calmly as he could. "But you said it yourself. I've been under a lot of stress. I need a break. By myself. Just to rest. I promise. I'll be back in a day or two."

Phil stared at him for a minute, then sat back in his chair with a disgusted snort. "All right. I don't care. Do what you want. But if you get caught, don't expect me to come to your rescue, because I'm *not* going down in flames with you."

"No one is going down in flames," Marcus said reasonably. "Except Sorenson. When I get back we're going to hammer him into the ground, and we're going to do it without shoving any more bogus legislation through the council."

Phil stood up. "Yeah, yeah, and after that we make a jump for the governor's chair, and from there the goddamn presidency. Sure. Easy as pie. Enjoy your trip." He turned and strode out of the office.

Marcus spent the last couple hours before midnight packing the car's trunk full of things that Kardalkeddy and Naralena might be able to use. Camping equipment, dried fruit, a hunting rifle and his military .45 pistol, some of Lita's and his own clothing, and a few gold Krugerrands he had bought for investment. At 11:30 he drove downtown, parked on the street in front of City Hall, and let himself in.

When he topped the stairs and turned down the hallway, he could see light streaming out under his office door. Had Beverly forgotten to turn it off when she left? Or were Kardalkeddy and Naralena early? Marcus hurried to the door, found it locked, and dug impatiently in the pocket of his jeans for the key.

There was no one in the outer office when he opened the door. Beverly's desk was covered with files, and her desk lamp was on as well

as the overhead. She must have stayed late, then forgotten to clean up before she left. Unless she was still here, in the bathroom; but no, the door was still open, and the light off. Then she must have gone home without straightening up. That wasn't like her, but maybe she intended to come in early in the morning and continue whatever she'd been doing.

Marcus went on into his own office, flipped on the light there, and paced until 12:05, when Kardalkeddy suddenly appeared.

"Are you alone, Sidenta?"

Marcus nodded. All the muscles in his body were tense. He felt as if the Zetain would follow them here, as if the chase would happen in this world as well as in Kardalkeddy's.

Kardalkeddy reached out for Naralena, who stepped through nothingness, then took another step forward to stand before Marcus. "I missed you," she whispered.

Marcus drew her into his arms, and kissed her hungrily. "I've missed you, too," he said.

They kissed again. After a moment, Kardalkeddy coughed discreetly and said, "Sidenta, we must be away. The border is far to the south."

"We'll get you there, don't worry," Marcus said. "I've got a fuzzbuster." When he saw two puzzled faces, he said, "Never mind. Let's go."

He opened the door to the outer office, just in time to see Phil make a break for the darkened bathroom doorway.

"What the hell are you doing skulking around my office in the middle of the night?" Marcus demanded.

Phil stopped, turned around, and said, "Checking on the mental health of my candidate. Who were you talking to?"

"Some friends of mine," Marcus said evenly. "On the phone."

Phil shook his head. "You weren't talking on the phone. Not unless you have a separate line that doesn't go through Beverly's." He pointed to the multi-line phone on her desk, all its call lights dark.

"Cellular," Marcus said quickly.

"Show me the set."

It was still in the car, of course. Marcus felt panic closing in. He was caught. Phil would never believe him, nor believe *in* him anymore. He would probably go to the press himself with this one. Unless Marcus could somehow convince him of the truth.

"Kardalkeddy, I need your help here," Marcus said.

"I am yours to command, Sidenta."

Phil crossed his arms over his chest. "Who the hell is Kardick — whatever?"

"He's the person who's about to flip my office light on and off three times." Marcus held his hands out so Phil could see them.

"Uh, Sidenta, how do I do that?"

"The switch! The little plastic thing by the door. Flip it up and down." Sweat broke out on Marcus's body.

"Oh. Like this?" The light went out, then back on.

"That's right. Twice more."

The light blinked, and Phil's eyes narrowed. "There's someone in there with you."

"Well, of course there is. You think I'd be talking to myself?" Marcus stepped into Beverly's office. "They're just not the sort of people you're used to. Naralena, come in here, and pick up those papers, would you?" He nodded toward Beverly's desk.

Naralena, her face taut with fear, nonetheless walked obediently over to the desk, scooped up a handful of papers, and held them a few feet in the air.

Phil's eyes were as wide as fried eggs. "How the hell did you do that?" he asked.

"I have friends in high places," Marcus said. "Invisibly high places. Kardalkeddy, switch out the light and close the door."

Kardalkeddy did — from the inside.

"No, no, from this side. We've got to go." Marcus swallowed. Phil was staring at the door as if a monster were hiding behind it.

After some experimental rattling of the knob, the door opened again and Kardalkeddy stepped through, closing it behind him. He went over to Naralena, who shot Marcus a pleading look. Marcus nodded at her, just a little. She set the files down and she and Kardalkeddy walked across the room to the other door, opened it, and stepped into the hallway.

Phil glanced at the door, then at Marcus. Marcus made himself glare at Phil with his most businesslike look. "We'll talk about this when I get back. In the meantime, see what you can do about getting Lita out of that damned hospital. She's no crazier than I am."

Phil's mouth hung agape, and tiny squeaking noises came from his throat.

"Don't say it," Marcus told him, "or they might start haunting you." Then he followed Kardalkeddy and Naralena out the door and closed it softly behind him.

Marcus took the interstate south. The traffic was light this time of night. Marcus drove seventy or so until a semi passed him, then sped up and followed a half mile behind, letting the truck smoke out the cops. The last thing he needed was a speeding ticket.

Naralena and Kardalkeddy sat up front, Naralena between the two men. Her arm brushed against Marcus's and he could feel the tension in it during the first ten miles or so, before she became used to the motion. Kardalkeddy asked a few questions about the car, but quit when the explanations made no sense to him. After that he stared out the window into the blackness, squinting whenever they passed an all-night gas station. When they got closer to Chicago, the road flooded with light, and both Naralena and Kardalkeddy stared at the truck stops, roadside groceries, and mini marts with open-mouthed fascination.

Marcus felt tension in his own back. He hadn't driven at night in a long time, and beneath his outward calm lay a deep terror. It felt appropriate to drive at night; the enemy that chased them was unseen, like a bogey under the bed, and yet very real.

The city itself left his passengers speechless, at least until they drew downtown. The traffic was light enough that Marcus had decided to take 94 straight through instead of going around on 294. Their silence had him afraid he'd made the wrong decision until Kardalkeddy suddenly pointed and said, "There is the Zetain palace."

"You're kidding," Marcus said. Kardalkeddy was pointing straight at the Sears Tower.

"I am serious," Kardalkeddy said. "There, where that tallest building is; in our world that is the Zetain Palace."

Marcus laughed. "Here it's a palace of sorts, too. A monument to big business." He drove on, amazed that there would be such a connection between worlds. He hadn't even expected the landmarks to be the same, but now that he thought about it, it made sense. How else would

Kardalkeddy know exactly where to go in order to appear in Marcus's house as opposed to his office?

On the way out of town Marcus pulled off the freeway at a gas and fast-food stop and let the car coast into the nearly empty McDonald's parking lot.

"We cannot stop here," Kardalkeddy said. "This is the heart of our enemy's homeland."

"It's just a rest stop," Marcus said. "The car needs gas and we need food. Come with me, and experience the true heart of America."

He let them out of the car and they went into the McDonalds. While Naralena and Kardalkeddy stared at the murals of the Chicago skyline, Marcus ordered three big Macs, two orange juices, and a large cup of coffee for himself. He got it all to go, then put his hands on his friends' backs and literally pushed them outside.

Once inside the car, he passed out the food. They stared at the wrappers in confusion, so he pulled his back and showed them how to eat the burgers.

"They did not cook the food," Naralena said. "It was magic."

Marcus grinned. "If they had used magic, these things would taste better."

He filled the car at the Texaco station across the street, then drove down the ramp and back onto the freeway, steering with one hand, and eating with the other.

"How much farther?" Marcus asked as the Chicago skyline receded behind them.

"We have covered several days' journeys in the space of a few hours," Kardalkeddy said. "If we go for another hour, the Zetain will have to travel into their enemies' country to find us."

"Good," Marcus said. He set the cruise control and leaned back for some more driving.

Naralena had fallen asleep, her head resting on Marcus's shoulder, when they drove over a bridge and Kardalkeddy said, "We have crossed the border."

"Great," Marcus said. "So where do we go from here?"

Kardalkeddy squinted, as if peering into bright light, and said, "That way." He pointed east.

Marcus took the next exit he could find and drove east for about two miles before Kardalkeddy told him to drive south again. The road went through a series of dilapidated family farms. On the top of a rise, Kardalkeddy said, "This will do. The city of Perecelto lies over this hill. It would be better if we walked from here rather than appear in its midst."

"Good thought." Marcus pulled the car to the side of the road and shut off the engine.

They all got out and Marcus showed them the things he had packed, but Kardalkeddy shook his head sadly over most of it and said, "We would be branded as witches or worse if we arrived with these tools." In the end he took only the Krugerrands, which could be melted down for their gold. Naralena took one of Marcus's shirts, "to give to the baby when he grows up."

Her words sent a pang through Marcus. The entire morning had a feel of finality to it. "He'll have more than just that shirt," Marcus said with a gruff joviality. "I'll shower him with gifts every birthday. And Christmas. Hah!" He laughed, realizing that they didn't have Christmas in their world. Not yet.

He hugged Naralena one last time, enjoying her warmth. When they finally parted, he shook Kardalkeddy's hand, and promised to return to the same spot in a week to meet them again. The sun had broken through the early morning clouds when they stepped away from him, waved, and disappeared.

The empty road trailed on toward nothing. He had only the remembered feel of Naralena's body against his, the firm grip of Kardalkeddy's hand, as proof that they had traveled with him at all. He sat on the edge of the car until he got cold, but the road in front of him didn't change. Naralena and Kardalkeddy didn't reappear out of nothing, nor did they appear farther away. They had found safety, for a short time at least.

But they would have him. He was finally beginning to understand the Biblical stories. Jesus's father, whomever that person may have been, interceded in all sorts of ways. He probably took his son off the cross and tended him in his more advanced world for three days before returning him, healed, to Jerusalem.

Marcus grinned. No one would believe that one, but it seemed so simple. He shrugged. Now he had to tend to his own life. He got into the

car, and drove back toward home. The farther he drove, the better he felt. He hadn't done something for someone else for a long time. This time, he had done a genuine good deed, and he felt great.

It wasn't until he stopped for lunch in Chicago that his fatigue caught up with him. He decided to get a room for the night — to make good his promise to Phil — and then reality hit him.

Phil. The campaign. City business. He had ignored it all so long. Phil had been spending more time with the council and Councilman Seals than Marcus had. Everything was a mess. Even his relationship with his campaign manager. What had Phil said about his mental health? And what had Phil been doing in his office, anyway?

Marcus had only been home for five minutes when he heard a knock on the door. He peered out the kitchen curtains and saw Phil's car in his driveway. A shudder ran down his back. It was ten a.m. The only way Phil could have known that Marcus had arrived would have been to have someone watching the place. Phil had Marcus under surveillance. So much for good old-fashioned trust and acceptance.

Marcus went into the foyer and pulled open the door. Phil pushed past him without a hello, then reached around him and slammed the door shut.

The force of Phil's anger hit Marcus like a wave. He had to take a step back. He ran a hand through his hair and caught his breath before attempting to reply. He couldn't be on the defensive. Something told him that this meeting was too important for that.

"You have someone staking out my house."

Two spots of color appeared on Phil's cheeks. "You would too if your meal ticket was acting like a nut."

"My actions have been perfectly rational," Marcus said and then mentally kicked himself. Not defensive. Oh, he was doing a good job there.

"Yeah, rational," Phil said. "If you're Jimmy Stewart and you have a big invisible rabbit friend named Harvey."

Marcus winced. He had once said that very line to Lita. "Look, Phil — "

"No, you listen, Marcus. Maybe insanity runs in the Chambers family, or maybe you attract poltergeists or maybe your brains have this extra power like people in Stephen King novels, but whatever it is, it's

weird. And weird does not play in an election, you got me? I have been working hard these last few weeks to try to save your ass, and frankly, it's beginning to look like I need to save mine. I have pictures of you talking to an empty room, Marcus. You went off half-cocked at a press conference, for godsake, and now you run off to Illinois, stop beside a ditch and sit there for hours, then come home. *This is not rational behavior, Marcus.* I'm sorry. It's not."

Marcus sat on the stairs, the polished wood digging into his thighs. "You had me followed."

"Of course I had you followed. And I had to make sure no one else followed you. I can imagine what Channel Six would have done with footage of you hugging empty air."

Marcus ran a hand over his face. He and Phil had been friends. They had become confidants by political necessity. They understood each other. If Phil was upset about this, the public reaction would be worse. And Phil had a right to be upset. Marcus hadn't even thought to be careful on the drive. He hadn't even realized that someone had followed him; he had been too concerned with saving Naralena and Kardalkeddy. He knew how this looked. He remembered when Lita got more and more distracted, when her imaginary world became more important than her real one.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked.

Phil closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose as if he were holding back a headache. Then he moved his hand, opened his eyes, and sighed. "Let's go together and talk to Lita's doctor. Maybe he has some suggestions that we haven't thought of."

A frisson of fear ran through Marcus. "I'm not checking myself into that hospital."

"Jesus Christ, Marcus. We're just going to go talk to the doctor. Everything is confidential. He might have some ideas about treatment, so you can keep going the way you did before."

Marcus sat still for a moment. Phil couldn't force him into the hospital. No one could, except the state, and that was so hard to do a person nearly had to commit murder before they would take action. Marcus had forced Lita in, but she hadn't really put up any resistance. She had even said to the doctor that it would be a relief if the invisible people all went away.

It wouldn't be a relief for him, though. Naralena was carrying his child. She needed him to help keep her and the baby out of danger.

But Phil needed him too. So Marcus would go to the doctor, play Phil's game, and try to behave normally. He didn't have to be back in Illinois for a week. Maybe in that time, he could regain control of his office, his staff, and his city.

"All right. I'll go." Marcus said. He stood up. "But if anyone catches wind of this, I will deny that this visit was anything more than a chance to see my sister. And if I suspect that you leaked the information, I'll fire you, Phil, faster than you can say 'Marcus is crazy.' You got that?"

"I got it," Phil said.

"Good," Marcus said. He grabbed his keys from the key stand. "Let's get out of here."

THE HOSPITAL was even more dismal than he remembered it. Someone had moved Lita's plants from the window. An old man wearing a blue bathrobe and white slippers had shuffled his way into the reception area where he pounded on the desk and demanded to use the phone. The receptionist had a look of harried fear to her face. An orderly and a nurse arrived a few minutes after Marcus did. They grabbed the old man's arms and hauled him away as if he were an unruly child.

"I'm here to see Dr. LaPine," Marcus said. Phil had dropped him off, promising to arrive as soon as he found a parking spot. But Marcus understood what was taking so long. This place made Phil even more uncomfortable than it made Marcus.

The receptionist nodded. Her hands were shaking. She ran a bejeweled finger along a page of the appointment calendar. "It'll just be a minute." He sat down in one of the plastic chairs facing her desk.

"So, did you come to protest?"

The voice behind him made him jump. It sounded like his mother at her most upset — Marcus Donald Chambers! Get in here this second! — but it couldn't be. He turned and found himself staring at Lita.

Her gaze was brighter than it had been before, and her face had more animation. He reached out to her, but she shot a glance at his hand that warned him away. "Protest what?" he said.



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"They took me off the medication two days ago. I suppose you want me back on it so I stay out of your way." She spoke at her normal pace, but he hadn't seen her this angry ever before.

"No. I came for another reason." Despite her look, he took her arm and led her into the hallway. "I helped Kardalkeddy and — ah, I helped him escape the Zetain and now Phil thinks I'm crazy."

Lita gave a slight laugh. "I know what that's like."

"I'm here to talk to your doctor at Phil's suggestion, and then maybe see if I can get you out of here."

"As if that'll do any good," Lita said.

"You'll be home, Lita."

She shrugged.

"Lita — "

She brought her head up so that her gaze met his squarely. "I don't think you know what you did, Marcus, my dear beloved brother. I'm off the medication, but I can't see them anymore."

"I told you," he said. "I took Kardalkeddy to Illinois. You can't see him because he's not here."

She shook her head. "No," she said, keeping her voice soft, "you don't understand. I had gotten to the point where I could slip into their world. Not for very long, but just enough to get a sense of it. I can't anymore. Whatever those chemicals were, they futzed with my brain badly. You took an entire world away from me, Marcus. An entire world."

"Mr. Chambers?"

The receptionist had come into the hallway. She clutched a file in front of her like a shield. "Doctor LaPine will see you now."

Marcus shot a glance at Lita. He couldn't say anything. An apology was too small for what he had done. He turned, and found Phil hovering at the edge of the reception area. At first he wondered how much Phil had heard, and then he decided that he really didn't care. The damage had been done a long time ago.

He squared his shoulders, took a deep breath, and steeled himself. Then he followed the receptionist inside Dr. LaPine's office.

He remembered it from earlier visits: the diplomas on the wall — six of them, expensively framed, all from major universities — the leather furniture whose odor mixed with that of pipe smoke, the handmade oak

desk in the corner, and the psychology books sitting on the matching bookshelf. LaPine was standing in the center of the room, the unlit pipe between his teeth. He was a big man who had been a track star in college: he still jogged six miles a day and competed in marathons. He nodded as Marcus came in, and indicated a spot on the couch.

Marcus sat, and LaPine sat in the straight-backed chair across from him. Phil took the rocking chair near the window.

Marcus didn't look at him, keeping his gaze on LaPine. "I thought this was going to be a private meeting."

"I asked to sit in," Phil said.

"I thought clients had to be examined in privacy." Marcus still addressed LaPine.

LaPine took the pipe out of his mouth and rested it in the pipe stand. "Not in cases of evaluation, Mr. Mayor. There's many a forensic psychologist who never meets with patients at all, merely reviews records and studies tapes and transcripts."

"But that's for court. That's when people are paying them to testify for another side." Marcus remembered that much of his legal training, even though he had never practiced in a court of law.

LaPine shrugged, and Marcus suddenly felt cold. He glanced at Phil, whose hands were folded neatly across his lap. Only his thumbs were moving, caressing each other in small, neat, nervous circles.

"Phil paid you," Marcus said. "You paid him!"

Phil shook his head. LaPine held up a palm at Phil. "I am here to consult with you, Mr. Mayor," LaPine said. "I have reviewed video tapes — "

Marcus clenched his fists.

"— transcripts of your conversations, and I have spoken with witnesses about your behavior. We have spoken before, remember, and I am quite familiar with your sister's case. It appears that there is some other family history of disturbance — "

"Only Aunt Verna who had Alzheimer's," Marcus said.

"— as well as other indicators. I believe that bringing your sister here was the last step for you, the last bit of stress which took you beyond the threshold that your mind could handle — "

"I am not crazy!" Marcus stood up. "There is a rational explanation for everything."

LaPine picked up his pipe and stroked it like a lover. "Would you like to share that with us?"

Marcus hesitated. He knew how it would sound. He remembered when Lita had given a similar speech to him and to Phil. Only his was worse. He had made love with an invisible woman. He had driven invisible people to safety outside the state. He had bought into their world one hundred percent.

"No," he said. "I would not. And I won't stand for this lynching. I do not have to stay here."

"No, you don't." Phil stood too. "But if you leave, you can kiss the election good-bye. I think you'll find it nearly impossible to even finish out your term."

"I don't like the sound of that," Marcus said.

"It's quite simple really." LaPine was looking down at his pipe. "It is my professional opinion, Mr. Chambers, that you are in no condition to run this city. I believe you need treatment or your delusional phases will get worse and you might be of harm to yourself or others. I am prepared to make such a statement to the press."

"Why?" Marcus asked. "Because Phil paid you?"

"I haven't paid him anything," Phil snapped. "Jesus, you're paranoid too."

"A person is not paranoid if people are actually out to get him."

Phil opened his mouth, shut it, then opened it again. "Marcus, we've known each other a long time. You've always been a sane, rational man. You haven't acted like yourself for weeks now. You moon over things, you see things that aren't there, you lie to me. You've never done that before."

"And you have been grooming a new candidate. You have Seals all ready to run if I get out of the way."

Phil nodded. "We both understand political expediency. We agreed a long time ago to step aside if one man's career endangered the other."

"You think I'm endangering you."

"If this continues," Phil said. He leaned against LaPine's desk. "Listen, Marcus, I hate to do this. I really do. But you need help and you won't get it for yourself. I have been trying to talk to you since the press conference and you won't listen to me. Now you're getting angry at Dr. LaPine and we're only trying to save you."

Marcus took a deep breath and waited for his pulse to slow. "You know I'm not making this up," he said to Phil. "You saw the light in my office go on and off by itself, and you saw the files on Beverly's desk rise into the air by themselves. How do you explain that?"

Phil swallowed. "It was some kind of trick. Something you learned from Lita."

"Yeah, right."

Marcus stared at Phil, watching him sweat, but at last Phil looked away and said, "I didn't want to do this, but LaPine warned me that it might be the only way to break your denial. Marcus, I have tapes of you talking to thin air. I have people, including Dr. LaPine, willing to testify to your odd behavior. Worst of all, I have Lita. I have your own words defending the decision to put her away. And frankly, your behavior has been ten times worse than hers."

"You'll ruin me," Marcus whispered.

"If I have to," Phil said. "If we let the press run with this, you'll never work again. Anywhere. But if you finish the term, resign in relative silence, you can work with LaPine here or some other doctor of your choice, and once you're rested and healed, you can come back to political life."

Marcus was shaking all over. "This is blackmail."

"Actually," LaPine said, "it's intervention. And it's only recommended for extreme cases."

Marcus sat down. He could barely breathe. This must have been how Lita felt when he presented her with the options. Trapped. Misunderstood. And frightened. It was so easy to strip him to nothing. Years of work gone in a heartbeat. A single news story and he would be the crazy mayor forever.

LaPine got up and rummaged in his desk. Phil remained standing, his thumbs still tracing each other in endless circles.

"You've got me by the balls," Marcus said. "No matter what I do, I'll lose. All I can do is decide how big the loss will be."

"I'm sorry," Phil said. "You've left me no other choice."

Marcus closed his eyes and sighed. If he resigned, no one would watch him anymore. He would be free to go back to Illinois, free to rescue Naralena and Kardalkeddy, free to learn how to slip into their world, even

if only for an instant. He found that the idea appealed to him.

"All right," he said. "I'll step down."

He opened his eyes. LaPine was standing beside the desk, his hands clasped behind his back, looking scholarly. Phil had his nervous, I-hate-the-world look plastered all over his face.

Marcus pushed out of the sofa and started across the room.

"Where're you going?" Phil's voice had an unnatural squeak.

"I'm going home. You got what you wanted. Now let me go."

"There's one more thing," LaPine said. "You must consent to sessions —"

"Fine," Marcus said.

"— and special treatments —"

"Fine."

"— and promise to stay away from anything that appears unusual."

"I promise, for crissake."

"Good." LaPine traversed the room in an instant and grabbed Marcus's arm. Phil hurried to his side. "We will start the treatment now."

"What the hell is this?" Marcus said.

"You agreed," Phil said. "I'm a witness."

"I didn't agree to this!" Marcus struggled against them, but Phil and LaPine held him tightly. "You need a signature, God damn it. I didn't sign anything!"

LaPine looked to Phil, who nodded.

"You son of a bitch," Marcus said. "You're going to forge it."

Phil wouldn't look at him. LaPine rolled up Marcus's sleeve and jabbed a hypo into his arm. The pain was slight, but terrifying. Marcus watched as the clear fluid slid into his vein.

"The medication will keep you calm," LaPine said.

"Calm?" Marcus's struggles grew more intense. "Like Lita?"

"Yes," LaPine said. "It worked for her."

"Nooo!" But already Marcus could feel the slowness creeping through his veins. He felt as if he were struggling in half-time. He had to get away, but it was too late. His legs collapsed beneath him, and they eased him to a chair.

"How much did you give him?" Phil's voice floated above him.

"A normal dose," LaPine said. "But I combined it with a sedative. He

Robert Reed's latest novel, Beneath the Gated Sky, has just been published. He comments that this story explains where crop circles really come from, and while we don't quite think he means it, we do offer this story as an entertaining explanation of whence come other, more important things (like values).

To Church with Mr. Multhiford

By Robert Reed

IT WAS EVERYBODY'S IDEA.
Or maybe it was nobody's.
Maybe it's that ideas drift in the air
like gas, and beer and boredom worked

on us to where we could catch hold of that particular notion. Sometimes I think that's what happens: Ideas are invisible clouds that get trapped inside people's heads. Different shaped heads trap different ones, which explains a helluva lot. Here in Pelican County we've got a lot of simple round heads, if you know what I mean. Here it pays to be perfectly average. And if you happen to get stuck with a fancy-shaped head — one that catches goofy ideas — then you'd best keep a hat on it.

If you know what I mean.

Habit is everything in this part of the world; nothing wants to change.

Our Saturday night habit was to go somewhere peaceful, like the cemetery, and drink beer. Which is what we were doing when the idea found us. Pat started things off, saying, "I'm bored."

Charlie belched and said, "Yeah, why don't we pull something?" A

prank, he meant. Detergent in the town pool, trees dressed up with toilet paper. That's the sort of stuff we specialized in. But that night somehow felt different, and we couldn't get excited about ordinary shit.

We had ourselves another round of beers, and I stared up at the stars, feeling smaller than small, and finally, after clearing his throat of a big loud gob of something, Lester said, "I know. Let's make ourselves a crop circle."

Charlie belched again — he's famous for his gassy sounds — then reminded us, "It's been done."

Not by us, but he was right. Pelican County is famous for its crop circles, and everyone knew who made them.

Old Man Multhiford, I was thinking. And just like that I knew what we could do. The idea settled in my head, and I giggled, and I said, "Hey, let's make a circle out on Multhiford's place!"

Pat straightened, eyes getting big and round. "On *his* farm? Are you fucking serious?"

Multhiford put maybe half of the circles on his own land. That was common knowledge. It was also known that he was insane and probably dangerous. If he spoke to you, he spoke about corn. His corn; all corn. I'd seen him talking on and on about its beauty and importance and how it was holy. Field of Loopy Dreams nonsense. Myself, I tried avoiding the man. If I saw him in town, I turned and slipped away. Even when my dad, the local Methodist minister, told me I was being rude. I didn't care. Madmen scare the piss out of me. Which is why our plan sounded fun, I suppose.

And the beer didn't hurt my mood, either.

"We aren't going to do it," Pat kept saying.

"Why not?" Charlie growled. "I like the plan!"

"Yeah," said Lester, "we'll put a circle in his own damned field. Nobody ever has."

"Who lived to tell it," Pat muttered. But it was three against one, no more need for debate. We loaded up Pat's old pickup with shovels and ropes and lengths of lumber. Lester rode with the tools. I sat between Pat and Charlie. Driving out into the country, the three of us talked about how to do it and do it fast — how do you make a flattened circle in the middle of a corn field, in the dark, on a madman's property? — and it was Charlie

who pointed out, "It doesn't have to be a circle. Is that some law? Why don't we mash down something simple, like a message? We can leave words in his corn."

"Take Me To Your Leader," Pat joked, laughing.

It seemed funny to them, and decided. To me words sounded a lot less pretty than a circle, but I knew they'd vote me down. That's why I didn't complain, riding quietly there between them.

Eventually we came to a low rise, barely worth noticing, and after that the ground started dropping, sliding into what used to be marshes. Past the next corner was Multhiford's land, and Pat killed the headlights, driving by moonlight, and all of us started looking for someplace to turn off and set to work.

The mood in the cab was getting a lot more serious. On both sides of us were enormous fields of corn, green oceans of the sun-fattened stalks. Another half mile ahead was Multhiford's farmhouse, set off the road in the only patch of trees on his section and a half. Where in all this nothing could we hide the pickup? Behind a little machine shed, we decided, and Pat parked and killed the engine, everyone taking a deep breath before climbing to earth.

I don't know much about corn — I'm as urban as you get in Pelican County — but Multhiford's corn looked particularly tall and happy, standing in all that rich black marsh soil, moving the way corn does at night. Big leaves were uncurling in the cooling air. Hundreds of acres were uncurling, and I stood off by myself, listening. I didn't hear the guys talking. I never noticed Charlie sneaking up on me. Grabbing my arms, he said, "Boo."

"Hey," I sputtered.

He handed me a length of pine and a dirty mess of hemp rope. "You make the F," he said. "That's your job."

"What F?" I asked.

"We took a vote. Take Me To Your Leader is too long." Probably true. "But if we make four big letters — "

"What?!" I snapped. I mean, I'm a minister's son. There are things I can sort of do, and things I can never do.

"But it won't take long," Charlie promised.

What started as clever vandalism was becoming something more

ordinary, and if I was caught, no doubt about it, my punishment was going to verge on the Eternal.

The guys started walking off into the corn.

When I didn't go with them, it was Lester who got sent back. "All you do is the F," he argued, trying to sound reasonable. "Did Charlie even tell you what the letters were?"

"I figured U, C, and K," I said. Somehow innocence didn't sound like an excuse. "Unless you're going to spell farm or funk. Is that what we're doing here?"

Lester shook his head, disappointed with me. "If you want, stay with the truck." He showed me a smile. One day he's going to be a killer salesman. "If Multhiford shows, give us a couple warning honks."

For not, I was involved. And I didn't want to wait around for that old farmer. That's why I followed the others, carrying my board and rope up close to my body, walking between the rows of tall corn. We went a couple hundred yards into the field, then huddled, deciding how to do it. "We need it seen from the air," Charlie kept saying, sketching FUCK in the soil. "Hundred foot letters. Think they'll get noticed?"

Think they'll be easy? I thought. Cutting through the rows, I paced off what felt like the right distance, then turned and started pushing over three rows at once. I was using my pine board and my muscles, but the plants were sturdy, fighting me all the way. I kept getting tired, kept losing my breath. I'd have to stop and stand, my back aching, my ears humming, and after a few breaks like that, the others had moved out ahead of me, and I couldn't feel more alone.

What I was doing felt wrong. Plain, simple wrong. And that feeling is what made me tired, guilt having its way of sapping me. It wasn't particularly late, the moon mostly full and hanging in the east, shining through a silvery haze. The air inside the corn was still, like a breath being held. It tasted thick and humid, full of living smells and weed killers. I was a town boy out where he didn't belong, all right. Turning, I tried to see the road, but all the world was corn, and I couldn't see anything but the silky tops and the stars, and the blackness between the stars, too.

Working again, I thought I heard an engine running. But when I stopped I couldn't hear anything but Charlie moving back along the big U he was building, pushing down more rows and never stopping. I was way,

way behind. I made myself finish the stem of my F, then I turned and looked up, and just then I saw the sudden bright beam of a flashlight.

"Scared enough to piss your pants." I've read about it a hundred times, but I didn't think it was possible. Until then. I almost pissed mine, I'll tell you. Urine started trying to sneak right out of me.

Then I heard a crunching sound and a voice that didn't belong to any seventeen-year-old kid. "Stop right there," it said, deep and strong. "You boys stop."

It was astonishingly loud for not being a shout, and it had the wrong effect on us. We started to run. I heard Pat shout, "It's him!" and Charlie screamed, "He's got a gun!" Then the gun was fired. Playing it back in my head, I think Multhiford aimed at the moon. I know the shot passed over me, and I was running like a maniac, heading back along the rows of downed corn. My feet caught in the bent stalks. My head pitched forward. What I'd knocked down knocked me down now, and suddenly I took a big dive into the best farmland in the world.

I can't tell you how long I was down. Fear and the beer helped keep me on my belly; my heart was pounding hard enough that I wondered if Dad could hear it. The running sounds died away, which was good news. I kept still, praying to go unseen. Then Pat laid into the horn, begging me to hurry.

Multhiford answered with a second blast — another tall one — and I realized he was standing ten yards from me. Maybe less. Which was why I got up and ran again, picking a new direction. Tearing crosswise through the corn, I ran blind, getting no closer to the pickup for my trouble.

There were more honks, then the pickup coughed and accelerated, the guys having no choice but to leave me.

And I dropped from exhaustion, rolling onto my back and no fight left in me. I lay there looking up at the towering corn plants, telling myself to keep still and wait, marshaling my energies for the walk home. It was just a five-mile walk, I was thinking. I promised myself to cut down on my drinking and study hard in the fall, and all that. Then I heard a man walking through his corn. Coming closer. And just when I needed to be quiet, I got a piercing ache in my belly, and the ache wanted to move, demanding to be let out.

That's what I was doing when Multhiford found me.

Beer can be a bad idea, and what you catch you can also throw away. The farmer found me heaving and coughing, vomit under my face. He shone his flashlight on me, and I turned, aware of his gun and his lean little body. I thought he would kill me out of hand. I just assumed that crazy men don't have trouble committing murder.

Except he didn't shoot. All he did was say, "I know you."

I coughed again, no strength left in me.

Then he said, "Get up," and gave his shotgun a twirl. "And quit the running. I know exactly who you are."

FAME IS FAME, no matter where it happens.

Strangers know the famous person too well, and they don't know him at all. Like with my father, for example. He's been the Methodist minister for years, and he's considered to be the most Christian man in the county. He's got what a minister should have — a pleasant wife and a good and pretty daughter — but to make things fair, he's also got a half-wild son. I guess I'm some kind of test for Dad, and since my infractions are mostly tiny, I'm a test that he's passing. Maybe not in God's eyes, but at least in the local ones.

The town doesn't love Dad, but it admires him. Which is the harder trick, if you know Pelican City.

Yet Dad's not the perfect Christian everyone imagines. I won't claim he drinks or loves the ladies or puts on Mom's makeup and pumps. What I mean is that he has doubts. About God and himself, mostly. About the things people think ministers should trust in and accept with every Christian breath, every second of their eternal lives.

Early this summer I was reading in the den, and Dad came and sat, announcing, "I just saw Clarence Multhiford." He waited for half a beat, then added, "At Wal-Mart." As if that would help me understand why this was news. Then, after a long look, he said, "We talked. We had quite the conversation."

"About corn, I bet."

"Sometimes," Dad admitted. "He said that his crop is doing well, but Henshaw planted late and the Jacob brothers are sloppy...."

That's Multhiford. He always has the good luck, and he always gives

big advice. Which makes him about as popular as hailstones among our local seed-cap sect, I can tell you.

Dad gave me a stare, then said, "He asked about you."

"Who did?"

"Who are we talking about?"

I dropped my book, entirely surprised. "He doesn't even know me," I sputtered. Then, "What did the son-of-a-bitch say?"

Dad's soft face turned disapproving. "Now, John," he began. "Didn't we agree that in this house — ?"

"What did Multhiford ask about me?"

"How you were doing in school and where you might go to college." Dad gave a little sigh and shrug. "He suggested one of the Big Ten schools—"

"He doesn't know me," I complained.

"If he did know you," said Dad, "he'd know that you'll be lucky to reach the community college in Lanksville." And with that he gave me his patented disappointed glare, reminding me of last year's grades. "As for his interest...well, he's always had an eye for you."

"A what?"

"Don't you notice him watching?"

Me? Me? I didn't even want to think it.

"I know he comes to Sunday services now and again. He sits in the back and watches —"

"Not me! Not me!"

Grinning now, he said, "You have noticed, haven't you?"

Maybe, and maybe that's why I kept my distance from the madman.

"Has he asked about me before?"

"Never," said Dad, without doubt.

I couldn't make sense of it. I didn't want to make sense of it. "Well, he's nuts. That's what that means."

Dad lifted his gaze, looking off into the distance. Then, with a certain care, he said, "I don't believe so. I know unbalanced people — I've tried to console them, without much luck — and I don't think Clarence resembles them very much."

I growled, thinking of those bright insane eyes staring at me. "Do sane men make circles in the middle of fields?"

"Does Mr. Multhiford do that?"

Of course he did. Everyone knew it.

"I believe in fungi," said Dad. "It attacks the stem, causing the plant to flatten." He spoke calmly, with all the authority of a gardener whose tomato plants died before August. "You know, there are old reports of circles. Older than *him*. Some date back to the 1890s."

"Made by flying saucers," I snapped.

"Have you heard Mr. Multhiford ever mention UFOs?"

How could I? I didn't have conversations with him, and I wasn't going to start now. "He makes the circles," I maintained. "People have seen him doing it."

"People see him driving at night, yes. They find him watching their fields, I agree. But nobody has ever caught him flattening anyone's crop." Dad shook his head. "It's got to be a fungus."

"That loves his farm best?"

"He has the perfect soil and the best hybrids. You see? It's just a matter of chance."

I'd had enough. I stood and asked, "Why should Multhiford care about me? I'll go to college, or I won't, and it's not his business."

Dad seemed to agree, but his voice trailed off before it got started. He sighed, glanced at his open hands, then sighed again. "I'm jealous of the man."

"Of who?"

"You know who." He looked straight at me. "Really, of all the people I know...I don't know anyone happier than Clarence Multhiford...."

"He's crazy, Dad. Lead-poisoned nuts."

"Fine. Maybe that's the answer." Dad looked up at the ceiling, then asked both of us, "Can you imagine anything more terrible? Two human beings hope a third human is mentally ill, and why? Because he's too happy and too different for their tastes."

He gave me a sad little smile. Dad's got one of those faces that aren't real comfortable with happiness.

"Isn't that a horrible way to think?" he asked me. "Can't you feel even a little shame, John?"

"I know exactly who you are," Multhiford warned me. He didn't sound like a particularly happy man, but then again, he didn't sound

angry, either. I saw the big double-barreled shotgun in one hand, then his flashlight found my eyes, blinding me. "Stand on up, John. Please."

He did recognize me. One hope was dashed.

"What were you boys doing? Why'd you hurt my corn that way?"

I swallowed, stood. Trying to talk, I discovered that my voice had abandoned me.

"What were you doing in my field, John?"

"I don't know," I whispered. "I mean, I didn't hurt much...."

"Didn't you?" He stepped closer, the glare of his light hiding his face. But I could see him by memory, the face lean and hard and red from the sun, crazy eyes burning in the middle of it. I could smell him, his earth and corn mixed together with his unwashed bachelorhood. First with his light, then his gun, he pointed off into the distance. "Why don't we walk to the road, John? You can lead. And please, don't hurt my corn anymore."

My legs felt heavy, mired in an invisible syrup.

The madman stayed behind me. "What would your father think if he knew you were here? Would he be proud of you?"

I tried to come up with something smart to say, but the best I could do was squeak, "Probably not."

"Maybe we should go tell him."

My legs stopped moving. For that instant, I'd rather have been shot dead than have Dad know what had happened.

"Let's make a deal," said Multhiford. "I won't press charges. I won't even mention this to anyone. We'll settle up tonight, and you'll be free and clear."

That sounded wonderful, for about two seconds. Then I imagined all kinds of debt-settling horrors, and I started walking again, breathing faster, picking up my pace.

"Like how?" I muttered.

"You can do some work for me."

"Tonight?"

"You don't look busy," he replied, his voice smiling. I could hear the smile in it, which made me angry. He was holding a gun at my back *and* feeling happy, which wasn't fair. "I need some heavy things moved, John, and I'd appreciate the help."

"My friends know I'm here," I blurted out. "If anything happens..."

"I understand." He didn't sound crazy. He sounded as if he genuinely

understood everything, as if he was full of wisdom. Coming up beside me, walking on the other side of a green wall of cornstalks, he promised, "I'll have you home in time for early service."

Shit, it was Sunday morning, wasn't it? Glancing at my watch, I saw that it was past midnight. Even if I escaped now, I couldn't beat my one A.M. curfew.

But there wasn't any escape. Side by side, we stepped from the corn, the air turning cool and dry. I could breathe easier. Sounds felt sharper. Multhiford broke open his shotgun, two empty shells flying. He hadn't reloaded after firing at the moon, and realizing it made me feel even more defeated. Moonlight showed me that face that I remembered, the smile too big and happy, and his baling-wire body was dressed in ordinary farmer's clothes — jeans and comfortable boots and a simple shirt. "My truck's down this way." We walked together, him carrying his shotgun broken open, and after a little while he said, "It's a perfect night."

I said nothing.

"Perfect, perfect, perfect," he was saying.

I didn't offer any opinions.

"They'll come tonight, John." He took a deep breath, then said, "In a little while. Soon."

I looked at my feet, watching them move on the graveled road.

"Who's coming, John? Who do I mean?"

We reached his pickup — a big new Chevy, a rich farmer's toy — and I heard myself answering him. "Aliens in a flying hubcap," I said.

Multhiford looked at me, and he laughed, telling me, "How much you know is so close to zero, son." He shook his narrow head, enjoying himself. "So close we might as well call it *nothing*. And how do you like that?"

THERE'S A CERTAIN BOOK in the Pelican City library. I've never checked it out; I sneak it into a back corner, reading it when no one will notice. It's about crop circles, and it's got pictures from around the world.

Half a dozen pictures show local circles, always from the air and mostly on Multhiford's land. I won't admit it to anyone, but I like looking at them. I don't believe in UFOs. Aliens have better places to be, I think. It's just

that the circles and the other marks are kind of pretty, obvious and orderly against the bright green crops. I've even secretly admired Multhiford for his skill, working by moonlight, or less light, working by himself and making Pelican County into the crop circle capital of this hemisphere.

"Investigators" come through every spring and summer — wrong-looking, wrong-sounding people from California and the shadows of Stonehenge. It's not enough to say that we watch them with a certain suspicion. But to his credit, Multhiford won't have anything to do with them. I know this: If he was making circles *and* acting as a tour guide, then I think something bad would have happened to him long ago. If you know what I mean. I mean, if you keep your oddness inside the family, all is fine. But ask the world to watch, and the locals won't be so patient.

That library book barely mentions Multhiford. Just a quick paragraph saying that one farm has more circles than the others, and its owner — unnamed — has the best yields of any local farmer.

Year in, year out.

I've read that part twenty times, in secret, and honest to God, it never occurred to me just what that means.

We pulled off the county road, driving up to Multhiford's farmhouse. It was normal at a distance, tall and angular with the usual shade trees huddled around it. But the legends made me expect more, and sure enough, it wasn't long before I was noticing the statues.

The old farmer built them out of car parts, lumber and crap from the local landfill. Nobody knew just why. No two were the same, but they all looked like weird corn, leaves oddly shaped and cobs oversized and their stalks twisted every which way. It was just like I'd heard, down to the general spookiness. I watched the statues watch me as we drove past, and I halfway expected them to pick up and move. To chase me, maybe.

Multhiford put us in reverse, backing in between two metal buildings.

We climbed down. I found myself staring at a stack of concrete blocks and chunks, rusted fingers of rebar sticking out here and there.

The tailgate dropped with a powerful crash. Multhiford told me, "I want you to fill it for me. Agreed?"

I picked up a little chunk and threw it in. It hit the plastic liner with a thunderous boom.

"Here," he said, "use these."

Work gloves fell at my feet. Putting them on, I smelled their owner on leather. I set to work, throwing in half a dozen blocks before I noticed the voice, quiet and steady and almost sane. Except the words themselves were anything but sane.

"People didn't domesticate corn," he said. "If you think about it."

I'd rather not, thank you.

"It's corn and the other crops that did the domesticating. They took wandering hunters and made them into farmers. They tamed a scarce ape and made it civilized." A pause, then he asked, "Why, John? Why did corn and wheat and the rest of them do it?"

I didn't think I was listening, but I stopped and looked at him, trying to find some kind of answer.

The farmer was standing safely off to one side, shaking his head. "Look at the world from the corn's eyes. It finds an ape to enslave. We serve it by plowing the ground and caring for it. We bring water, manure, and propagate its children for it. And the corn rewards us with food and wealth." He paused, taking a big breath. "Farming makes cities possible. Cities make armies possible. And the armies marched off to conquer new lands to plow and plant." Another pause, then he added, "For a tropical grass with no certain parent — a bastard, that's what corn is — it sure has done awfully well for itself. Don't you think?"

If someone had asked what I'd be doing tonight, I wouldn't have pictured myself flinging concrete and suffering through a loopy history lesson.

"The old empires thrived so long as they cared for their crops. You must know that from school, John. Greece. Rome. The Soviet Union. All failed as farmers; all succumbed. That's how our crops punish us when we can't keep them happy."

I paused in my work, telling myself that the pile was getting smaller.

"You don't believe me," said Multhiford. Then he gave a big laugh, asking, "Do I take care of my corn, or does the corn take care of Old Man Multhiford?"

I looked at the shiny new pickup, then out at the perfect rows of lush green grass. Suspecting a trick, I said, "I don't know."

"The ancients worshipped their crops," he offered. "Are we smarter,

or are we less aware? Maybe what's happened, John, is that we're so thoroughly enslaved that we can't even see the obvious anymore."

With a half-block of concrete in my hands, I gave a silly shout. "I'm nobody's slave!"

"You don't eat?" He laughed again. "Well, maybe not. I can't claim to have seen you at your supper table."

I threw the half-block on the pile, watching it roll and catch.

"Do you think much about the future, John?"

I wished he'd quit saying my name. I said, "Sometimes," and wished I hadn't. I started flinging concrete like someone possessed, grunting and groaning, making my arms and shoulders start to burn.

But Multhiford spoke with a big voice, no way to ignore him. "In the future," he said, "think what we'll do for our corn. Today, this minute, scientists are learning how to change its genetics, giving it extra ears and nitrogen nodules, then fancy leaves to suck up every drop of sunlight. We'll make it grow faster. It'll be tougher. We'll give it new jobs. Making medicines. Human hormones. Fancy clean fuels." He paused, then let out a big sigh. "You're a bright young man. I can tell that for myself."

I didn't respond, but I could feel his compliment worming into me.

"What I'm saying — listen, John — is that life will get richer for the corn. And for people, too. In a few centuries, both of us will be living on Mars and the moons of Jupiter. Eventually, what with our birthrate — who knows? Somewhere someone will get rid of farmers, leaving the corn to care for itself. Simple minds grafted into their stalks, say. And just imagine if billions of plants were to start linking minds, improving themselves however they want —"

"Corn's stupid!" I shouted, with a panicked inflexibility. The block in my hands fell free, landing against my foot. But I didn't grimace or hop around, telling Multhiford, "Stupid, stupid! And we're in charge! We eat it, for Christ sake. It doesn't eat us."

He shrugged as if to tell me my words didn't matter.

And I doubted myself, for that instant.

"Imagine the far future," he said, "and the day we meet aliens rather like ourselves. What do we give in trade, John? Our crops would be valuable. A multitude of uses, designed for a multitude of worlds. Think of how many green worlds might welcome our corn."

My anger started seeping out of me. I couldn't keep hold of it.

"Corn has spread over this planet. Why not across the galaxy?"

Not once, never, had such a loopy idea gotten inside my skull.

"Corn prospers, carried along by commerce and conquest." He said it, then paused. Then he gave a big dramatic sigh before asking, "Who survives the next billion years, John? Human beings, arrogant and blind, or the adaptable crops that we tend?"

I said, "We do," out of instinct.

"You know this, do you?"

I said, "You're insane. That's what I know."

I'd been thinking it all night, but finally saying it did nothing. I must have thought the words would be like thunder in a clear sky, the old man left shaking. Except his only reaction was to smile. And the clear sky swallowed up my words, leaving everything still and quiet.

I couldn't stand the silence. I picked up a huge block of concrete, getting ready to heave it.

"No need," said the smiling madman. "That's enough now."

At last! I dropped the block and peeled off the gloves, wiping the sweat from my hands.

But Multhiford said, "Just a minute. Now I want you up in the bed and throwing it all back down. Put everything in the same pile again."

"What?" I blurted. "That doesn't make sense."

Shaking his head, he asked, "Does spelling a dirty word in my field make sense?" He was laughing louder than ever, telling me, "You're being punished, John. Remember. Pointless is the point in being punished."

I wondered if running away would help.

"Put the gloves back on, John."

I did as I was told, flexing my hands, listening to the creaky old leather and thinking, just for that little instant, that this was what I deserved.

Multhiford said nothing during the unloading. He leaned against one of his metal buildings, his face dark against the moonlit metal wall. It was nearly three in the morning when I finished. I said, "Done," and he came over, giving the bed an examination, then pointing. "Missed some pieces."

I tossed them overhand onto the pile. Except the last bit, which I threw out into the field of stupid corn.

"And sweep it clean, too."

He gave me a blunt straw broom, then climbed into the cab. I did a rush job and jumped in the other side, thinking I was going home. I was already planning what to tell the guys, including embellishments.

Multhiford's legend was going to grow, I'd decided. The night was looking worthwhile, thinking about my own little future.

We drove maybe fifty feet, then stopped.

"What do you think of my friend?"

We were parked in front of a phony cornstalk. I was close enough to touch it. I couldn't help but stare at the thing.

"What do you think?" he repeated.

It had a cob that wasn't a cob. It was made from bits of smooth glass, each bit looking more like an eye than a kernel. The plant itself was painted black, and some kind of wiring was sewn into the stalk. Its roots weren't roots, either. They looked like worms or muscular tendrils. Scrap plastic and pounded metal had been shaped to make it seem that the plant was moving, walking on its roots. And its leaves were thick and wrong-shaped, reminding me of stubby arms.

A lot of arms, I was thinking.

"I wish I'd done a better job," said the old farmer. "I wish I was a stronger artist."

Except it wasn't bad. I mean, forced to look, I had a real feeling for the thing. I was impressed enough that I almost said so, catching my tongue just as we started rolling again.

Multhiford didn't bother with headlights. He had us on the county road, keeping it slow. Toward town, but never fast. I could see the town's lights in the distance, and I watched the field passing on my right. There wasn't any better corn in the world, I was thinking. Madman or not, Multhiford always planted the best hybrid, always on the perfect days, and all at once I was thinking about him and his noise about the future...thinking my own crazy thoughts...and I realized we were coasting, the farmer's boot off the pedal and him asking, "What if people could travel in time? I don't know how. Maybe we'd have to hammer together some dead stars, or build some wormhole do-dad. But what if we could?"

I wouldn't look at him. I made up my mind, watching the field, staring out at the blurring rows.

"People might visit our hunting ancestors and thank them. Pay homage, we could. It would be a religious event, and we'd select only our finest, holiest pilgrims for the honor."

I didn't look at him, but my resolve was slipping. The rows were crawling past as we ground to a halt. I felt my heart pounding, not fast but each beat like an explosion.

"Our finest pilgrims," he said again.

It wasn't a light that I saw over the field. It had no color and made no shadows, and it didn't even have a real shape that I can name. But inside it were motions, energies. Without deciding to move, I opened my door and jumped down, gravel crunching under me. Then with a calm dry voice, Multhiford said, "Go on." He reached clear over to touch me, saying, "They're expecting you. Hurry on."

I ran. Before I could get scared, I shot across the roadside ditch and into the field. I wasn't even running, it was more like flying, everything dreamy and slow. Leaves slapped my face. I lost sight of my target. Then, just when I thought I was lost, I felt a presence, electric and close, and the air tasted of comet soils and perfect manures, working machinery and some kind of vibrant, tireless life.

The ground under me was covered with gently flattened cornstalks.

For the third time in a night, I fell; and when I tried to get up I had hands grabbing at me, holding me down while voices sang, speaking just to me. The voices knew my name. There wasn't anything they didn't know about me. From the ends of time they told me as much, then whispered, "Be at ease." A million pilgrim voices sang, "John, be at ease."

I tried to obey, roots swirling past my nose.

Stalks of every color, thick and thin, crowded around me, leaving no room for air.

I tried speaking.

Before I could, they said, "Quiet. Quiet, quiet."

I kept perfectly silent.

Then they broke into a shared song, dry leathery leaf-limbs rolling me onto my back, giving me a larger view. The pilgrims were tall, too tall to measure, stretching into a sky full of messy colors and countless stars and swift bright ships of no particular shape; and the song deafened me, cutting through my saturated brain; and finally, after a million years of listening,

my eyes closed and I fell asleep. Or unconscious. Or maybe, just for a moment, I died.

I woke when someone shook me.

It was Mr. Multhiford's hand on my shoulder, and it was his voice saying, "Almost morning, John."

I smelled normal green corn. The farmer above me was framed by the brightening sky. Three times I tried to sit up, then he helped me with my fourth try, bringing me to my feet.

"Some evening," was his verdict. "Wouldn't you agree?"

I couldn't even speak.

"I've been where you were," he confessed. "'Once. Just once.'" He let those words work on me for a moment, then added, "Believe me. All you need is one time."

"But why?" I managed, making my parched throat work.

"Why us?" A big shrug, then he said, "They like us. With me, they get a damned fine farmer who keeps their secrets. With you? They see someone who's going to do something good for them. I don't know what exactly. I don't know when. But they told me about you — "

"Told you?"

"Years and years ago," he said, laughing again. "They tell you something once, believe me, *you remember.*"

"What else did they tell you?"

"Next year is dry, and there's an early frost. For instance." He looked off into the distance, then added, "In twelve years, plus a few weeks, my heart gives out and I die."

"You know that?" I whispered.

He shrugged his shoulders as if saying, "So what?" Then he pointed, asking, "Do you see that bent stalk over there, John? Well, you and I both know it's real. It exists. It occupies a place and doesn't need us touching it to make it what it is."

"I guess not...."

"Look back through time, and there's the past. There's me planting my corn, and you drinking beer with your pals. It's every instant of our lives, good and not, and lives like that can't be killed. Not by heart attacks, at least." He gave me a big wink, then added, "That's the best thing they ever told me, John. We're always here, always living this life." A big happy

smile, and he said, "So do it right. Live as though you'll always live it, because you will be. Because that's just the way these things are."

We rode into town without talking, nothing worthwhile left to say.

Early risers saw us together, and they stared. When we pulled up in front of my house, Dad practically exploded from the front door, and when I climbed down he screamed at me and hugged me and gave me a sloppy wet kiss on the cheek. He'd just gotten off the phone with Charlie. He thought he knew the story. "I'm so furious with you," he told me, never looking happier. Then he glanced at Mr. Multhiford, saying, "Something awful might have happened." But he showed no malice toward the farmer, either. And then Mr. Multhiford drove away, without so much as a good-bye wave, and I was left to suffer a couple more hugs, then the unrestrained affections of my sister and weepy mom.

They thought they knew. Vandalism. Gunfire. And I was missing, presumed wounded. Maybe dead.

Feeling halfway dead, I went inside to eat and shower and put on some good clothes. Dad left for early service. I made it to the eleven o'clock service, finding the guys waiting for me on the front lawn. It was Charlie who told me that they'd just come from Multhiford's, and did I know there was a new circle?

I gave a little nod and the beginnings of a smile.

"He caught you and made you pound it out," said Charlie.

"Is that what happened?" asked Lester.

"I bet it is," said Pat.

We were all dressed for church, standing in a knot, watching people streaming inside. After a few seconds, I said, "That's it exactly. He made me pound it out."

"How's he make them?" Charlie wanted to know. "With boards and rope? Like we figured?"

"Yeah," I told them. "We were right."

"So now we know," Charlie declared, almost as happy as Dad. "It makes last night worth it, huh? Getting shot at. Being chased. We sure as hell worried about you, let me tell you."

I didn't say anything.

"After church," he said, "come over to my place. Help us finish off last night's beer."

Lester and Pat made agreeable sounds, punching me in the arm.

I still hadn't answered when Dad came outside, heading straight for me. The guys scattered in something just short of panic. Oh, well. From where I was standing I could see the edge of town, green fields stretching around the world; and just then, just for a moment, little snatches of the future became clear in my head. I saw myself in college. I saw myself grown up, changing the shapes of living molecules. Making new kinds of corn....

To the corn, I'm famous.

"This afternoon," said Dad, "We'll discuss your punishment."

I blinked and turned toward him, saying, "Fine."

Then he hugged me hard once again. For a long time. People were watching, but I didn't care. I stood there and took it, only squirming a little bit, and I even came close to admitting how good that hug — and everything — felt just then.

Know what I mean? ₹



"I want you to go vegetarian."

If the answer to a riddle is a signpost in a maze, is the riddle just a riddle? Lisa Goldstein gave us a maze of a city in Tourists; here she leads us down an entirely different path.

Down the Fool's Road

By Lisa Goldstein



AND THEN THEY WERE ALL around her, surrounding her, five or six or thirteen of them. Lights like candles were coming on against the dusk; the darkening street was set out before her like a banquet. "What?" Amanda said. "Who — ?"

"Come on," one of them said, laughing. "Come follow us."

"Come on, come follow," they said. They fell about her like autumn leaves.

"But who *are* you?" she asked.

"Oh, you don't know us," said one.

"We assure you," said another.

"Don't know us."

"I have to get — " she said.

" — to work," said one. "We know. We know. Come follow."

She worked at night, in a gleaming tower that shone like a beacon from a mile away. Phones jangled, printers whirled, fax machines chuckled softly to themselves. In the morning someone she had never met

would come and collect the work she had done. "I can't just — " Amanda said.

"You can. Say yes."

"No, I need the money — "

"We'll give you countless riches," said one.

"Lemony gold," said another. "Silver like fishes' scales. Sapphires as blue as the skin of strangled men. Say yes."

"I don't believe you," she said.

"No, no, don't believe us. We're terrible liars."

"Dreadful."

"We're lying right now, in fact."

She laughed, a little despairingly. "Then why should I come with you?"

"No reason at all, really."

The men and women ringed about her, pressed in close. They were short, and dressed in rags and ribbons of green and brown and gold. Their faces were narrow and feral, their ears pointed. Their eyes gleamed. She tried to back away but they surrounded her, their eyes as sharp as swords.

One or two of them smiled. Suddenly it was like the end of a magic trick, the watch restored to its rightful owner, the woman sawn in two made whole again. No one with a grin that wide could possibly mean her any harm. "All right," she said. "Yes."

And then they were running down the street with her in the middle, laughing for no reason she could give. Trees scattered their leaves around them. Dogs barked. Overhead the moon lay drowned in a great river of cloud.

They came to a doorway and darted inside. She must have passed this building a dozen times, a hundred, on her way to work, but she had never known what it was. Crowds of people moved through a room; dim tattered murals covered the distant walls. The light was the color of old coins. A man slipped in after them, carrying a furled umbrella against his chest like a regimental rifle.

"What is this place?" Amanda asked.

"Hush," one of them said.

One of the men nudged the woman next to him. "Look," he said. And, "Look," she said to the person next to her.

A woman was coming in through the door, sheathed like a knife in a dress of shot silk. A double strand of pearls grinned at her throat like a second set of teeth. "Who is she?"

"Hush."

The woman pushed forward into the room, walking on high stiletto heels, and stopped to talk to the man with the umbrella. They were both carrying drinks; the woman's was green as poison. Some of the tattered crowd Amanda had come with were holding drinks as well, but she couldn't see where they had gotten them.

"They're here," whispered a man next to her. And, "Here," echoed another.

Some of the wild band clambered up on one of the tables and started dancing in circles. More joined them, and then more; they spun faster and faster, laughing and singing. The woman with the pearls headed toward Amanda, her staccato heels clattering against the floor.

"They've brought you, then," the woman said. "Hello, Amanda."

"What do you mean?" Amanda said. "Who are you? How do you know my name?"

Two or three of the dancers spilled off the edge of the table. Then they all tumbled to the floor, laughing and cursing. A small man, his red hair curling upward like a flame, pushed his way out of the tangle and saw Amanda.

"Stars and narwhals!" he said to the woman next to him. "You were supposed to be keeping an eye on her!"

"I?" the woman said. "Who gave me the responsibility?"

"Well, look what you've gone and done," he said. "Who knows what they've been telling her? Come along," he said, going over to Amanda. "It's time to go."

"Go?" Amanda said. "But we just got here."

"We've got to go," the small man said. He grasped her by the hand and pulled her along behind him, out into the street.

The sky had grown darker while they were inside. The moon was higher and smaller, a white stone tossed up against the black sky. The band ran on ahead. She hurried after them until she was breathless, until trees and telephone poles, cracked walls and windowpanes, blurred around her. They passed streets she had never seen before, River Road,

Forest Drive, Moon Crescent. Endless Street, Darkness Road, Way of the Dead. "Wait," she called out. "Wait!"

Terror gave her speed, she ran until she was safely in the midst of them again, surrounded by them. "Where are we?" she asked.

"Don't you know?" a woman asked. Her smile reached nearly to her ears.

"Who was that woman with the pearls?"

"Never you mind." The woman grasped her roughly by the shoulder.

"Come along."

They turned down Fool's Road. There were trees all around them now, their branches clasping hands overhead in the darkness, their leaves whispering secrets. Ahead of them a light shone through the forest.

"Is this wise?" one of the little men asked. "Who knows what might happen there?"

"Hush," a woman said. "It's the best place, under the circumstances."

"Circumstance," someone said. "Circumscribe," said someone else, and "Circumvent" added another.

"Hush," the woman said again.

"Circumspect," someone whispered loudly, and several of them snickered.

They rounded a bend in the forest. A castle stood ahead of them, glowing like a rind of moon. The small band marched forward openly, not noticing, or not caring, how hopelessly out of place they looked in their red and russet fox's colors. As they came closer the walls of the castle loomed high above them; stars stood like sentinels on the battlements.

One of the woman knocked boldly at the door. "Come in, come in," a man said, opening the door to them. "We've been expecting you."

"Expecting us?" the woman who had knocked asked. "What does that mean?"

"Go on, go on," the red-haired man said, pushing her forward. "It means nothing. Go in."

They stepped into the entryway. The floor was patterned in black and silver tiles. The man who came to meet them wore livery of checkered black and silver squares; he seemed a moving, living part of the floor.

"Welcome, welcome," he said. "The festivities are this way."

"Festivities," someone said, nodding. They followed him into the next room.

The room was huge, with a vaulted ceiling several stories high. A consort played in one corner; in another four or five jugglers tossed knives and burning brands. A group of people sat around a table by an open fireplace, eating a roasted pig. The band scattered, some to dance to the music, others to grab handfuls of food. An orange cat scuttled across the floor, its ears flat against its head, a cooked pigeon clutched in its mouth.

A small fat woman came over to Amanda. She was dressed in brown, with a high pointed brown hat nearly as tall as she was. "A riddle," she said. "You lie in her, she lies in me. Who am I?"

"What?" Amanda asked.

"Maleficent malachite moons!" someone shouted from across the room. He hurried over to them, still holding a haunch of pig in one hand. "What are you doing? Don't talk to her!"

"Who can I talk to, then?" Amanda said, annoyed. "You're always hurrying me away."

"Oh dear, oh dear," the man said fretfully. "This is worse than I thought. Come on, let's go."

"No," Amanda said.

"What? Trust me — You don't want to stay here."

The man was right; she didn't want to stay. A cold dread had come over her, enveloping her. She wanted to run, to dance, to spin along the roads like leaves. And yet the woman's words were important: she knew that somehow.

"Have you guessed the riddle yet?" the fat woman asked.

"No," Amanda said. The man tugged at her hand anxiously. "What's the answer?"

The woman laughed. "Come — I don't tell you the answer," she said. "You tell me."

"I don't know," Amanda said.

"Let's go," the man said. Others in the band joined them, crowded around her. "Let's go, let's go," they said.

"You don't want to know," a woman said.

"To know, to know," they echoed. "Let's go, let's go."

They pushed and prodded her toward the door. The woman with the

pearl necklace and the man with the umbrella were coming into the room. "Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear," said the man holding her hand. He looked around him uncertainly, caught between the newcomers and the small brown woman.

"What now?" a woman asked.

"Oh dear," the man said again.

"Upstairs," the woman said decisively. "Come on."

They moved toward the stairs, walking quickly and then running. Amanda looked back; the fat woman was watching them with level brown eyes.

The stairs curved upward, white as bone. They hurried on. A few did handstands up the stairs; one moved toward the banister as if to slide down it and was pulled back roughly by his companions.

They came to a landing and scurried off in several directions down the corridor. One pulled open a door and stood as if transfixed by what he saw. Amanda moved behind him, looking over his head.

There was a pedestal in the center of the room, and on the pedestal a purse made of silver rings that glistened like a waterfall. She jerked back as if the sight had hurt her. Someone had once had a purse like that, but who....

The next room held nothing but a scent, lemons and something more elusive, something sweet. Someone had once worn a scent like that....

In the third room a woman was singing a wordless melody like a lullaby. Someone had once sung a tune like that....

She turned and ran for the stairs. Four or five of the wild band stood there, blocking her way. "No no no no no," one said. "You can't go there."

She pulled away from them. "I'm not staying here," she said.

"No, of course not. Come follow, come follow."

They hurried toward the end of the corridor, some of them turning cartwheels along the way. A stained glass window stood at the end of the hall, showing a stately woman dressed in folds of reds and purples. A darker figure loomed behind her, a beast or a shadow. They hurtled through the window, shattering it into a thousand pieces, and fell outside.

She jumped after them. They landed together in the tangled branches of a tree, a rain of ruby and topaz glass pattering all around them. They looked at each other, wide-eyed, a gaggle of birds from no

earthly bestiary, and then they laughed and plucked the branches from their clothing. Carefully they climbed to the forest floor, helping Amanda as they went.

And then they were all running away from the castle, darting among the boles of the trees, calling to one another as they ran. Their voices grew fainter, farther apart. "Wait!" someone shouted. "Stop! We're lost!"

They drew closer together, looking anxiously at the confusion of branches above them. An owl screeched in the distance. In the dim light Amanda saw that their clothes were riddled with holes.

"This way," one said. "Toward the light."

"The light is the castle, you porridge."

"Toward the darkness, then."

"It's all darkness, except the castle."

They stood uncertainly. The owl's call sounded closer, and then the small brown woman appeared before them. To Amanda it seemed as if she had been transformed from the owl.

"I'll guide you out," she said. Her voice was soft and low. "But you must answer my riddle first."

They looked at Amanda as if awaiting her decision. She shook her head. She didn't know the answer; more, she didn't want to know. She felt the cold dread again, and took a step back, away from the woman.

"You'll stay here, then," the woman said. "In the darkness, forever."

"But I don't know —"

"You lie in her, she lies in me," the woman said again. "Who am I?"

Amanda shivered as the answer came to her. "No," she said, taking another step back. "No."

"Tell me," the woman said.

"Earth," Amanda whispered. "You're Earth. And she is — she is —"

"Go on," the woman said. She sounded infinitely kind.

"She's my mother. I lay in her, before I was born. And now she — She's going to die, isn't she?"

The brown woman nodded.

No one said anything for several seconds. "Come on, come follow," one of the small band said, but it was clear his heart wasn't in it.

Her mother. The woman who wore the purse, and smelled of lemons, and sang the wordless lullaby. The woman in the stained glass window,

tall and regal as death. Her mother couldn't die. What would she do, how would she live, without her mother's ancient love and protection?

She wanted to run, to lose herself within the forest and never come out. Could she do that, could she stay in the darkness forever, as the brown woman had said? Or could she find the courage to face the thing she had been running from, running not just for a night but for the last several years, ever since that dreadful diagnosis?

She turned to the tattered band surrounding her. "Thank you," she said. "Thanks for songs and the laughter, the trees and the stars. For all the distractions. But I can't run any longer. I've got to go now."

"To work?" one of them said hopefully.

She laughed in spite of herself. "To visit my mother," she said.

And then it was morning, and she was walking up the sidewalk in front of her mother's apartment building, the small fat brown woman leading the way. As she approached she saw the man with the umbrella and the woman with the pearls coming out the door. "I'm too late, aren't I?" Amanda said.

"No," the brown woman said. "They haven't taken her yet — you have one last chance. Go make it count."

"Thank you," Amanda said, and went to knock on her mother's door. ॐ

Collector's Item

In December 1990, F&SF published a Special Stephen King issue, containing two King stories, "The Bear" and "The Moving Finger", an article about King by Algis Budrys and a King bibliography.

A limited edition of the issue was printed with a special cover stock, and we have some copies still available. \$15.00 each includes postage and handling.

Terry Bisson's one of the dreaming kind, the kind who imagine that the first people to venture to Mars will be actors, the kind who can conceive of ursine arson, the kind who think sorcerers ought not be loquacious. That's the kind of person Terry Bisson is, one of a kind.

The Player

By Terry Bisson

THE BELT IS A QUIET PLACE. The sun is so far away you can't hear its singing. The roar of a million million stars devouring themselves doesn't make

sound. The silence was broken by a beep.beep.beep.

Carol Ben Carol heard the beeps. She sought them with her seeker, found them with her finder. What she found was about the size of a car. She pulled it into the coldlock with a net.

CB Carol was named for her mother and father before her, as they were named for theirs. She was of a naming kind that had survived the hundred generation "here I am" that every naming kind undergoes, and one in a thousand survives, and settles down to enjoy the one galactic turning life span of every species, sentient or not.

Smaller than I would have thought, she said, not in English, but in a tongue that still held flourishes of that ancient, soaring, creaking, reeking mix. A language, like a Douglas fir, lasts about 500 years.

Carol talked to herself a lot. She was a good listener. She had been cruising the Belt for almost a year, looking for heavy metals. What she

found was a silver sphere about the size of a car. She pulled it into the coldlock with a net.

Not a ship, said CB Carol. That much was clear. No propulsives, no attractives, no environmentals. In her young heart of hearts she thought it might be that ancient dream of dreams come true: the smoke of another fire. For it was a made thing and she was of that making kind.

She cut short her trip and took it home. For she was of that homing, that gathering kind, that had gathered the branches of the planets together in a cradle to rock their babies to sleep. She took it all the way back to their ancestral watery, windswept little Ert or Earth or Heart or Hearth or Home.

The Q Group invited her to join (for she had pulled it into the coldlock with a net). Others in the Q group included: TRan de Markus, Bitter Sweet, Orson Farr, and Grohn Elizabeth, plus two sets of twins for symmetry. They were all of that prodding, that poking, that questioning kind.

The Q group went into a huddle as the oak leaves fell around them, in long lovely shallow drifts. Good listeners, they listened to the beep. beep.beep.

Each beep was made of smaller beeps, and those of smaller still. Mathematical. Bitter Sweet did the math. "Find me," it said.

Already did that, Carol Ben Carol said.

They found a little panel about the size of a door. Inside, there was a smaller sphere spinning in a beam of stationary light. Singing beep.beep.beep.

TRan de Markus did the music. "Fix me," it sang, and so they did, for they were of that fixing kind. A slight wobble, a simple test of hand and eye. The stars straightened up on their silvery strings. The beeps folded into a hum, long and flat and thin.

Then stopped.

The silence was eloquent. "Send me on," it whispered. The Q Group nodded, a little forlorn. Their work done.

Carol Ben Carol took it back out to the Belt. Orson Farr went with her. The planets whirled by in their giddy whirlpool stream.

Carol Ben Carol thought about those who had found it and fixed it before, and those before them, and before them. It was so old. She

wondered who would find it and fix it after she sent it on. What if nobody found it? She was afraid to let it go.

It has to be found and fixed every million million years or so, or it will slow down, she said. Develop a wobble. Stop playing true. Then stop playing altogether. She was afraid to let it go.

Let's keep it here, said Orson Farr. We might live a million million years. But probably not.

Probably not, said Carol Ben Carol, who had pulled it into the coldlock with a net. She wiped it off and made it shine like a mirror. Peering into it she saw a million spinning wheels of streaming carbon sparks that someday might, that someday would, weave another wandering, finding, fixing kind.

And what's it playing? asked Orson Farr.

Carol pointed it toward the stars. The universe, she said, and gave it a spin, and sent it on its way. ॐ

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Lewis Shiner's last appearance in these pages, back in 1984, was the story "Till Human Voices Wake Us," which Bruce Sterling reprinted in the cyberpunk anthology Mirrorshades. Shiner's muse has taken him away from cyberpunk and brought us such novels as Slam and the World Fantasy Award-winner Glimpses, but here he returns to the cyberpunk theme of whether we need our fleshly bodies in a story with a rather Huxleyan feel to it.

Like the Gentle Rain

By Lewis Shiner

Author's note: The following was presented at an academic conference on J.D. Bernal's 1929 essay "The World, the Flesh and the Devil: An Inquiry into the Future of the Three Enemies of the Rational Soul."

I OPENED THE DOOR AND saw only fog and rain. A voice said, "Mrs. Donovan?" I looked down, and there he was.

I'd never actually seen a Scientist before, except on TV. He was the size of Harold's ShopVac, a cylinder mounted on a motorized platform, with smaller plastic containers all around it. Clear plastic hoses with bubbling liquids in them went from the main cylinder to the other containers. One was clear as water, another red as blood, and the third looked like, well, pee. At each corner of the platform was a sort of arm, somewhere between a boom on a crane and a lobster claw.

The eyes were the worst. There were four of them in all, two swivel-mounted on each side of the cylinder, each in a plastic box full of fluid with cables coming out the back. They looked like hard-boiled eggs with circles

painted on the end and veins drawn along the sides. Every few seconds one of the lobster claws would reach around and squeegee the raindrops from the front of the clear plastic boxes. Behind each of the eyes was a microphone, and trailing off the back were two whip antennas that looked like the curb feelers on the new Hudsons that you see in the commercials.

The rain was beading up on his surfaces without burning him. I noticed there was a small ScotchGuard VI logo on the side of the cylinder, with the phrase "Rain? What rain?"™

"May we come in please, Mrs. Donovan?" The voice sounded like those recorded announcements at the mall, smooth and deep and cheerful. I could hear him saying, "No parking is allowed in the yellow zone."

"Sure," I said. Not that I had any choice, but I would have felt better if this hadn't been Harold's morning at work. I stepped back and watched the Scientist roll right on into the living room, the rainwater dripping off him and leaving yellow stains on the carpet. *All My Children* was on the wall screen, and I kept sneaking glances because they were supposed to be taking Erica to the rest home today. "You want a cup of coffee?"

"Coffee?" he said. "Whatever for?"

"I don't know. Just trying to be polite."

"That will hardly be necessary. We are Scientists." Then his voice changed, not in pitch or anything obvious, but it suddenly sounded as if somebody else were using it. "You do mean synthi-caf, of course? You were not offering us illegal organic coffee?"

"Of course not." Even if I could afford to buy real coffee on the black market, I wouldn't waste it on something whose taste buds consisted of a small chemical analysis lab.

"Our new synthetic foods combine, after all, physiological efficacy with a range of flavor equal to what nature provides, even exceeding it as taste demands."

"That's what they tell me," I said. "I've never actually made the comparison myself." I was lying. I tasted real coffee once and I still dream about it.

"Nor will you have to. You may rely on our scientific judgment." He paused and his voice changed back to the way it had been. "We would like to inspect your son Michael now."

A pang of fear went through me. "Is...something wrong?"

"On the contrary. Everything is going extremely well. Please take us to the child."

I led him to the nursery. Mikey was sleeping on his stomach, perfectly still except for his toes, which twitched like he was being tickled by a dream creature.

The Scientist swung one of his crane arms around and just before it reached for Mikey I saw the flash of a needle at the end of it. I lunged for him, but another arm came up, faster than I would have thought possible, and held me back.

"There is no need to be alarmed, Mrs. Donovan." I was, though. I was frightened out of my mind and I hated the way his voice stayed in that same should-have-been-pleasant monotone, the way he referred to himself as "we" because he was wired in to untold others of his kind, all of them watching me through his eyes. "This is simply a standard DNA verification procedure. Strictly routine."

The needle touched Mikey on his left upper arm and I saw him jerk slightly at the sting. I struggled but I still couldn't move.

"Our DNA analysis confirms that this is indeed Michael Julian Donovan, son of Jeanne and Herbert Donovan."

"Harold," I said.

"Er, yes. Harold Donovan. Congratulations, Mrs. Donovan. Tests administered to your son during his gestation indicate remarkable intelligence potential. He has been selected for higher education as a potential Scientist."

"Higher...there must be some kind of mistake. He's only six weeks old."

"We don't make mistakes, Mrs. Donovan."

"You just did. You got my husband's name wrong."

"A mere glitch. By higher education we mean higher in quality. History, mathematics, physics, eugenics, the teachings of the Master. We have found that, in order to maximize the potential of the intellect, education cannot begin too soon."

I'd seen this on TV, proud parents handing their babies off to Scientists to raise. I tried to feel properly patriotic, but the emotion wouldn't come. "When...when would you want to take him?"

"Immediately, of course."

The floor wobbled under my feet. "You mean, now?"

"I can see you are deeply moved, but I assure you, no thanks are required."

"Would I...I mean, would I be going with him?"

"Certainly not."

"But...who's going to sing to him at night? Who's going to hold him when he cries?"

"As the Master has said, we must be more occupied with purely scientific research, and much less with the necessity of satisfying primary physiological and psychological needs."

"If you don't see to his psychological need for a mother, he's going to grow up into some kind of, of, monster."

"Secondary changes should not be taken into account when reacting to the primary desire or stimulus, in this case, the pursuit of science. Physiological steps will be taken without consideration of the psychological consequences. It is hoped, of course, that these physiological steps will lead to an unpredictably large increase in mental grasp and efficiency."

"What do you mean, 'physiological steps'?"

"I refer, of course, to his ultimate physical transformation into a Scientist such as ourselves."

"You mean...you're going to cut out his brain?"

An unconvincing chuckle came out of the speakers. "He will have anywhere from sixty to a hundred and twenty years of larval, unspecialized existence, as the Master says, surely enough to satisfy the advocates of the 'natural' life?" With that the Scientist produced a waterproof sheet which he draped over Mikey's sleeping body. He lifted the crib in two of his claws and started toward the door with it.

A lifetime of TV was still not enough to keep me from reacting. I screamed and lunged again for Mikey. The Scientist said, "This display is extremely inefficient, Mrs. Donovan." I felt a small stab of pain in one arm, and passed out.

That was in April, April the 13th to be exact. It took until September 5th to get an audience with my Representative, a woman named Gowan. I was granted ten minutes of her time, between 9:40 and 9:50 in the morning.

Much had happened in those five months. Harold left me in June, after two months of mutual recriminations, sleepless nights, and my unending depression. Which meant my having to move to a singles block, with a smaller TV and a communal gym and swimming pool. I'd lost twenty pounds and was on my fourth psychiatrist, looking for something other than second-hand platitudes from government pamphlets.

I probably did not look my best when I walked into Representative Gowan's office. I'd been awake all night and I'd spilled coffee — synthi-caf — on my blouse just as I was leaving the house. I'd had trouble parking and my umbrella had melted in the unusually acidic rain, leaving me with singed hair and a spotted jacket.

Gowan wore a tasteful white Chanel suit and pretended not to be alarmed by my appearance. She reached across her desk to shake my hand and said, "I have your letter here on my screen. You seem to object to your son being selected for higher education?" She sounded like she couldn't quite believe what she'd read.

"He was only six weeks old when they took him. Babies don't need higher education, they need their families."

"Six weeks is the standard age for matriculation of Young Scientists. That minimizes the damage done by untrained parents while still allowing them a nominal bonding period."

"Nominal? Six *weeks*?"

"After all, you did get to have him for the entire nine months of his gestation. Studies show we could have gotten quite a head start on his training if we'd had him for the last trimester. Mrs. Donovan, are you sure you're watching enough television?"

"Yes, yes, I'm sure."

"Did you have feelings of discontent or dysphoria prior to your son's selection?"

"No, certainly not. Harold and I were extremely happy. We'd wanted a baby for so long — ten years we'd been trying — and finally Mikey came along and it was like a miracle."

Gowan looked pointedly at her Rolex. "Mrs. Donovan, do you dispute that your home, your car, your TV, your clothes and meals are all furnished to you by the government?"

"No, but — "

"That in exchange for these comforts, you are required to work only a few hours a week at the laboratory to which you've been assigned? Do you deny that the government has a right to make use of its citizens as it sees fit?"

"No, but — "

"Mrs. Donovan. Do you know the first thing about magneto-fugal waves? About transplutonian synchronicities? About hydrometalotany?"

"No, but — "

"Then how can you presume to judge the methods chosen by the Scientists to pursue these, and so many other desperately important areas of research? It seems that your problem, Mrs. Donovan, is not with your son, but with yourself. You are not clear about your position within society. As the Master has said, even a scientific state such as ours can maintain itself only by perpetually increasing its power over the non-living and," she stared pointedly at me, "*living* environment.

"The progress of science depends to a large extent on non-scientific humanity. Routine workers such as yourself are needed in the laboratories, even public servants such as myself are necessary to provide an interface to the Scientific Advisory Board. More important still, the complexities of scientific — and particularly of theoretical scientific — thought call for an ever greater number of first class intelligences such as your son, uh — "

"Mikey."

"Michael, yes. The modern development of science can hardly be disconnected from the political and economic changes that have made it possible to recruit the personnel of science from wider and wider circles. We have to ensure that all capable minds are utilized. Do you see that, Mrs. Donovan?"

"Um. No."

Gowan sighed and took a blue-and-white strip of cardboard out of her desk drawer. The words WISDOM OF THE MASTER and ADMIT ONE were printed on it. "This will allow you to consult with the Master himself. Perhaps he can be of more help to you."

"The Master? I thought he was d— "

She held a finger to her lips. "Only his flesh — one of the three enemies of his rational soul. He lives on as an expert system, with a

telepresence in three hundred cities around the world. Including right here in Dallas." She stood up to offer her hand again so I rose and took it reflexively. "Reservations are necessary. The number is on the ticket."

As she sat down she was already calling up her next appointment on her laptop.

IN DECEMBER I got a notice in the mail telling me that my reservation to speak with the Master himself was scheduled for 3:35 A.M. on February 23rd, which was a Monday morning. "If you are scheduled for what seems to be an odd hour," the notice read, "have no fear! Remember that an expert system needs no sleep!"

All I could think of was that by the time I saw the Master, Mikey would be nearly a year old. He would have no memories of me, would have changed physically, and been changed emotionally, beyond my ability to recognize him.

I suppose my expectations were unrealistic. I suppose I wanted someone to at least take responsibility for what had happened to my child. If nothing else, I thought the Master would have some answers. So I arrived a half-hour early, full of synthi-caf, and waited on a plastic bench with a dozen or so others until the guards ushered me in at exactly 3:35.

The audience chamber was wide and low, with floor, walls, and ceiling made of polished granite. A rubber mat led to a granite bench in the center of the room. The bench faced a granite pedestal holding a TV set even smaller than the one in my apartment. On the TV was a face — kindly, elderly, vaguely English-looking. The eyes seemed to follow me. "Mrs. Donovan?"

"That's right."

"Please sit down if that would make you more comfortable."

I didn't want to sit. "Do you know where my son is?"

"I am not a part of the Scientist's network. But I know — in principle — what has happened to him. He is being educated. This is hardly something for you to be upset about. He will, after all, have anywhere from sixty to one hundred and twenty years —"

"As a larva," I said. "I've heard this part. I want to know what kind of human beings you think you're producing this way."

"New men. We hope to leave humanity behind."

"How can Mikey possibly be happy — "

"The man of the future will probably have discovered that happiness is not an end of life. We hope to place feelings under our conscious control, to favor, for example, the performance of a particular kind of operation."

"What about feelings like compassion? Love? Comfort?"

"We must not assume static psychology. In achieving this future we become different; becoming different we desire something new. These feelings you mention may not be appropriate to our future."

The room was very cold. I saw then how they'd done exactly what they wanted, sending me first to Gowan and now to the Master, with the achingly long months in between. They'd held out enough hope to keep me from doing anything truly desperate, while slowly grinding down my will and my anger and every other emotion I needed to fight them.

I turned and began to walk away.

"Mrs. Donovan?" the voice said. "Do you not have any further questions? You still have seven minutes and twenty-three seconds left."

I sat in my car and let the tears well up in my eyes. A good, long sob was just about to come out of my throat when a voice from behind me said, "Don't turn around."

I turned around. Wiping furiously at my eyes I saw the pieces of a Scientist spread over most of the back seat and floorboards.

"Please," he said. "If you'll just drive. I'll explain everything as we go."

As I pulled away from the curb he said, "You are Mrs. Donovan, aren't you?"

"How did you know that?"

"I accessed the appointment records for the Master. You seemed the most likely to be sympathetic." There was a pause, then he said, "I'm sorry about your son."

"What do you mean? Did something happen? Is he — "

"He's fine as far as I know. I meant I was sorry that they took him from you. That you've suffered."

The pain that washed over me was almost physical. I felt it in my chest and neck and eyes. "You're the first one," I said, "who's actually said that to me."

"That's exactly my problem. Too many emotions."

"Then how did you end up — "

"With my brain in a tin can? I was one of the first ones they chose for the program. They didn't have their psychological profiles very well tuned at that point. I was a second-rate history professor at a third-rate college with a knack for I.Q. tests. They offered me the chance to spend the rest of my 'natural' life studying at government expense, and then get a shot at immortality. Who knew? By the time I stumbled on some of the true history of the last century I wanted out, of course, but it was too late. They promised me I'd see things differently once I was modified. Only I didn't. And I don't. Which is why I've spent the last twenty years organizing this escape."

"How is that possible? I thought you were all networked together into one big brain."

"I got kicked out of the network. I was 'contaminating' their pure scientific thoughts. Listen, this could still be dangerous for you. You could just stack me up on some streetcorner if you want. I wouldn't blame you."

"I really don't care anymore. What worse can they do to me?" He didn't answer that, which struck me as a bit ominous. "So where do you want to go?"

"I've got arrangements to be shipped out as cargo on a flight at midnight. If you could just let me off someplace where I could catch a shuttle?"

"They might find you," I said. "You can stay at my apartment, and I'll drive you out there tonight."

"That's terribly kind of you. You don't even know me."

"I want something from you in return. I want you to tell me everything you know that might help me find my son."

I loaded his pieces into the freight elevator in the parking garage under my apartment block. No one saw me carry him into my flat. Once inside I found a crescent wrench and re-attached one of his crab claws so he could put himself back together.

"Do you have a name?" I asked.

"We Scientists simply exchange icons electronically," he began, then hesitated. "People used to call me Burt."

"Well, Burt, I'm going to have a cup of coffee."

"Oh God," he moaned. "Real coffee?"

"Synthi-caf."

"What I wouldn't do for even a cup of synthi-caf. Did you know that something like 80 percent of the people they perform this operation on go irrevocably insane within a few hours? Of course you don't know. Nobody outside the network does. But the sensory deprivation during the operation and recovery, the loss of neurons in the spinal cord, loss of hormones, foreign data from the donated eyes..."

"Why do they keep doing it?"

"They figure we were old anyway. No loss if we have to be destroyed."

"You mean they just...*kill* the ones that go crazy?"

"Only somebody with emotions would hesitate at murder. Logic only seeks the most efficient way to carry it out. The Master himself said that both the quantity and quality of the population should be controlled by authority. And that there might not be room for both the new men and the old men in the same world. The better organized beings — the Scientists, of course — will be obliged, he said, to reduce the numbers of the others in self-defense. Until they are no longer 'seriously inconvenienced' by them."

"This is unbelievable. Monstrous."

"Maybe, but it's nothing new. Do you know what a 'Hooverville' is? I'm sure you don't. They never made it into the history books. They were named for Herbert Hoover, who was President during a worldwide economic depression a hundred years ago. They were collections of shacks and tents and shanties at the edges of major cities, filled with people who'd lost their jobs and homes. A man named Anderson, who became obsessed with the Master's ideas, was Attorney General under Hoover. His first act was the secret liquidation of what he called the 'hardcore and intransigent poor.'"

"He turned them into liquid?"

"It was a euphemism. A polite way of saying murder. He spread the Master's ideas worldwide, and it was quietly decided that a second world war would be held to get the economies moving again. In the process they could eliminate the remainder of the lower classes and 'least intelligent' of the population."

"These people have Mikey," I said. "We have to get him away from them."

"Wait. There's more I have to tell you. The Scientists are only the tip of the iceberg. You've seen us. It must be obvious to you that we're not capable of running the world. It's all a sham, and it's kept in place by — "

At that moment the front door flew open and four men in dark suits walked in. They all wore mirrored sunglasses, all had bulges under their left arms, and all had wires going to plugs in their right ears. "Okay, pal," one of them said. "That'll be enough."

"This is an outrage," Burt said. He waved his crab claws in the air. "You have no right to — "

One of the suited men sidestepped a claw and pinched one of the clear plastic tubes that led to Burt's brain case.

"Glub," Burt said.

"Are you going to behave now, pal?"

"Glub," Burt said.

The man let go and Burt began to tremble. "Aw," said one of the other men. "You scared him."

"Damn things give me the creeps," said the one stepping away from Burt. "Looks like a damn talking ShopVac." He jerked his lapels down with both hands, then tugged at his cuffs as he looked at me.

"Who are you?" I said.

"Nobody," one of them said. "You never saw us." He looked at the others. "Let's get him out of here."

I took a step toward them, and the one nearest me raised one hand, palm out. It was a gesture of such menace that it rooted me to the floor.

Another one looked at Burt. "You coming quietly, or do we have to muss you up?" Burt held up two of his claws meekly, and with one of the suited men on either side, holding his hands as if he were a lost child, they led him out into the hallway.

As soon as the door slammed I ran to the window. Parked below was a huge Cadillac with six doors, black glass, and a small satellite dish. A few seconds later the front door of the building opened and the four men came out, still leading Burt by the claws.

I ran for the elevator.

At first I stayed close, but once we were headed north in the bumper-to-bumper traffic of Central Expressway it was impossible to lose them. We passed the island cities of Plano and McKinney and finally exited at Allen, where we turned east. Five miles out of town the Cadillac pulled up to an estate surrounded by high walls and a steel mesh gate. The gate opened for them and clanged shut again before I could follow.

I got out of the car and stood in the rain to watch through the gate while the Cadillac pulled up to a huge house with columns in the front and elaborate gardens on all sides. There were stacks of bright green sod along the driveway where the rain-burned lawn was being replaced. The men in suits took Burt out of the car and led him in through the double front doors, which were opened for them by a man in a tuxedo.

I found a small speaker on one of the stone gateposts with a button underneath it. I held the button down until a voice came out of the speaker saying, "Help you?"

"Some men took a friend of mine into your house. I want to know what they're doing with him."

"Could you describe this friend of yours?"

"Um, short? Mostly metal?"

Someone snickered in the background as the voice said, "I must have heard you wrong. Are you telling me that the little Scientist with the fried brain is your friend?"

"That's right. And I'm not leaving until I find out what you're doing to him."

"Suit yourself, lady."

The speaker went dead. I leaned on the button again, but after ten minutes or so my thumb got tired. By that time the drizzle had soaked through my clothes and was stinging my skin. I shivered and turned away from the gate and saw the police car pull up in front of me.

They tried to let me go with a warning, but I wouldn't leave. That got them scratching their heads to come up with a charge to hold me on. Resisting release? In the end they locked me up as a public nuisance, and gave me a dry T-shirt and jeans.

It was very quiet in the jail overnight. I think I even slept a little. In the morning I had a visitor. He was dressed in baggy shorts, a knit shirt

with an open collar, and loafers with no socks. He was about fifty years old, overweight but not really fat. He had short white hair and an expression of the mildest possible interest on his face. The four men in suits with him might have been the same ones who kidnapped Burt.

They left me alone with the five of them in someone's paneled and carpeted office. The white-haired man said, "So. Your boyfriend has his brain in a can."

"He's not my boyfriend. He's someone who was trying to help me. He was my last hope."

"If that was your last hope, you must really be in trouble."

"Yes," I said, exhausted, chilled, hungry and desperate, "I'm really in trouble." Then, for no sensible reason, I told him about Mikey and Representative Gowan and my interview with the Master. "You're one of the ones Burt was talking about, aren't you? The ones who really run things."

He tilted his head non-committally. "I assume Burt is your little robot buddy. His other little robot pals want him back awful bad. Maybe I'll let them have him, maybe not."

"Who are you?"

"Me? I'm rich."

I nodded. "I'm Jeannie. Jeannie Donovan."

He looked uncomfortable. "Rich isn't *who* I am, it's *what* I am."

"Oh."

"There aren't that many of us left. We tend to devour each other. But yes, your little friend Burt was right. We're the ones. We let the Scientists pretend to run things because they make us lots of money and they come up with really neat things for us to play with."

"So you let them cut people's brains out and drive them crazy and kidnap people's children and kill off the poor and helpless."

"Money has a logic of its own. We're not that different, us and the Scientists. Neither one of us is willing to let sentiment stand in the way of what we want. The difference is that rich people are seldom so pathetically naive."

"So what happens to me now?"

The white-haired man picked up a heavy glass paperweight and let it roll in his hand for a while. Then he walked over and looked out the

window at the rain. "I think I'll find your son for you," he said. "Don't get me wrong. Another day I might have had you killed. Or I might have tried to seduce you, and probably would have succeeded, if I tried hard enough. I can do anything. It's the big payoff for getting to be where I am."

He turned to face me. "Go home, Mrs. Donovan. Watch TV. You'll hear from me."

Three days later the Cadillac pulled up in front of the apartment building. I jerked back from the window where I had been sitting for most of the last three days, trying one minute to convince myself that there was in fact hope, the next equally desperate to believe that everything I remembered since my interview with the Master was some kind of hallucination.

Four men in suits got out of the car. One of them had a bundle in his arms. I ran into the hallway and stood by the elevator, unable to breathe. The doors finally opened. The man was carrying a child, about a year old, dressed in shorts and a tiny T-shirt. I had been wrong about one thing. I did recognize him, would have known him anywhere.

I took him in my arms, distantly aware that I was sobbing. "How can I possibly thank you?" I said.

"You can't," one of them said, already turning away. "So I wouldn't even try."

"Wait. What about Burt? Is Burt okay?"

"Your little robot buddy? He's fine. The boss has got him pulling weeds. Now unless you've got another two or three hundred questions, some of us have work to do."

The elevator doors closed and they were gone.

I looked down at the child in my arms. "Mikey," I said. "It's really you."

"Well, of course," he said. "Who were you expecting, the Dalai Lama?"

"I...I..."

"I'd offer to shake hands, but my muscular coordination is still very primitive. Do you think we could go inside?"

I was physically disoriented from the repeated shocks. I nodded and carried him into the apartment. "It's not strictly necessary," he said, "to keep holding me so tightly."

"What should I...where do you..."


"The floor would be fine, I should think."

I placed him carefully on the floor and he sat there, the very model of a beautiful year-old baby, except for the fierce light of intelligence in his eyes.

"Do you know who I am?" I asked desperately. "Do you feel anything for me at all?"

"Of course I know who you are. I've had the situation explained to me."

"But you don't feel anything? You'd just as soon be back there with the Scientists?"

"Well, no, actually," he said. "If the truth be known..." He looked to one side, then the other, and lowered his voice. "...they're really just a bunch of poop-heads." He leaned back and pounded his baby feet on the floor and laughed and laughed and laughed. 

THE MANNED SPACE STATION: WEEK FIVE

Want to perform some micro-gravity experiments?

WE DID ENOUGH OF THEM.

Spot any new planets?

NAH.

Well... let's watch a movie





A SCIENTIST'S NOTEBOOK

GREGORY BENFORD

SELFNESS

I AM A CLONE.

Or rather, I am better than one. Or so any identical twin surely must see the matter.

The recent media feeding frenzy about a cloned sheep, Dolly, showed us journalism in its fullest modern form. Many of those writing about this genuine watershed moment in techno-culture followed current journalist practice: their foremost research instrument was the telephone. Of those who called me — an unlikely authority, since I am not a biologist — none realized that DNA does not solely determine the heritage a child gets from its parents.

My brother, Jim, and I shared a womb without a view for nine months. (Though not always restfully, our mother reports.) Genetically identical, we also enjoyed the same currents and chemicals of our

mother. After a rather traumatic birth — both had our appendixes removed within days — we were brought up in the same house, with constant attentive parents, and even wore matching clothes until our late teens. (How much trauma this clothing ritual induced in our personalities I leave to others to decide; suffice to say that being seen as sugary-cute has left me with a decided prejudice against sweets in any form.)

True twins share womb chemistry and endure many fateful slings and arrows together. The fabled connection between twins is true, in my case. We are distantly dismissive of mere fraternal twins (different DNA) and regard all others as "singletons," those condemned by birth to endure the isolation of never truly sharing the intuitive grasp that we enjoy without paying a price.

Or nearly so. There is mild

statistical evidence that identicals have slightly lower IQ. This might be plausibly so; the comfort of ready communication may well lead to a certain mental laziness.

Jim and I felt the opposite. Reared in rural southern Alabama, we enjoyed an idyllic Huck Finn boyhood. But education there was casual at best. Our mother and father were high school teachers, and challenged the pervasive easygoing ignorance. We attended a one-room schoolhouse, with each row of seats a separate grade. Against this my brother and I united, reading widely and enjoying the clash of cultures which paraded by. After we were nine our father became a career Army officer, whisking us to Japan for three years, Germany for another three, and further isolating the twins from a continuity that might have sucked us into the conventional.

So we are an odd pair even among twins. Jim got his doctorate from the same institution as I, UC San Diego, in the same area (plasma physics) and now lives a few kilometers from where I once lived, in northern California. Such correlations appear often among twins. We grow up in a culture of sameness, so have a sense of self always shared.

Among singletons, interest in

twins is enduring. Do we feel some mystical sense of connection? Of course; but whether it is mystical or not begs description. I am writing this at 35,000 feet over Greenland, on the way back to UC Irvine from Lapland. I know without thinking about it that my brother is probably body surfing on a beach near La Jolla, though I have not spoken to him for ten days. I remember his itinerary and without conscious deliberation feel where he is likely to be. This is processing at the unconscious level, and as an experiment, when I see him in two days I shall check with him and let you know the outcome. [Later: my estimate was right to within the hour.]

But this is scarcely mystical. Instead, I attribute the innumerable similar incidents in our lives to a lot of automatic thinking, based on intuitions cooked up through more than five decades. To singletons this can look uncanny.

Speaking as a twin, clones seem a lesser form. They grow up in a later era than their genetic duplicates, with different upbringings. Would knowing that they were genetic duplicates trouble them? Surely such people would not be inherently more mentally fragile; Siamese twins are far more like

each other than ordinary twins, yet suffer no higher incidence of mental illness than is usual, suggesting that even extreme parallels in nature and nurturer are not damaging.

The furor over Dolly puzzled me by the emotional level of debate. Reasonable people like political commentator George Will asked, "What if the great given — a human being is a product of the union of a man and a woman — is no longer a given?" This issue properly comes from a broader issue in biotechnology, the entire field of artificial birth in all forms, for there are no precise boundaries in this new territory.

Certainly I see no reason why society should prevent grieving parents from having a baby cloned from the cells of a dead child, if they wish. Beyond such emotionally wrenching cases, where should we erect walls? Oxford biologist Richard Dawkins asserted that he could see purely intellectual issues intriguing enough to justify cloning himself: "I think it would be mind-bogglingly fascinating to watch a younger edition of myself growing up in the twenty-first century instead of the 1940s."

Many no doubt find his position puzzling or even immoral or disgusting. Even so, why should Dawkins be prevented from having

a cloned child? What is society's mandate?

The Dolly debate produced several claims that cloning violated the fundamental principle of individual dignity. Twins certainly belie that argument. Fears of interchangeable people armies, usually marching robotically onward, come from a simple-minded genetic determinism. And the grounds for a principle of uniqueness seem vague at best.

After all, why treat clones differently? — we twins and clones are all "monozygotes," as the biologists put it. In fact, clones necessarily separate in outside influences from their first moments in the womb, for the wombs are different. Another's DNA inserted into a host egg will acquire "maternal factors" from the proteins of that egg, affecting later development. The womb's complex chemical mix varies with each mother, so nine months of different "weather" will change the outcome in the fetus; the baby will not be a photocopy of its older original.

And clones will be full-fledged people with all rights attendant to that status. Nobody forces twins to serve as organ farms for their other twin; clones would have the same legal status.

The true first use of cloning will undoubtedly be in the "copying" of highly selected farm animals. These could first be excellent milk cows or racing horses. More futuristically, we shall see — and quite soon — the cloning of "pharm" animals that yield biotech products of use to us, such as insulin-rich milk from cows, and a whole array of therapeutic hormones, enzymes and proteins.

Plants have already been extensively engineered. More than three-quarters of the cotton grown in Alabama last year was genetically tuned to kill predatory insects. Already scientists are experimenting with cotton plants that contain polyester fibers, too, surely a boon for fans of leisure suits.

Still, cloning should indeed furrow the brow of long-perspective thinkers. We believe sexual reproduction holds sway over much of the kingdom of life because it provides ever-new gene mixes, allowing a species to build fresh defenses against the ever-mutating pathogens that infest the natural world. The perpetual arms race between prey and predator favors sex as a defense. Seen this way, we are men and women because the primary predator on humans have always been microbes, not tigers.

So "pharm" animals cloned over and over will face the very real threat of infectious diseases that wipe out a herd overnight. But surely nobody will clone huge numbers of humans, so such plagues will be quite unlikely. The breeds of influenza that regularly attack us genetically diverse humans will do far more damage.

As I write this, a presidential panel seems about to recommend a uniform federal ban on human cloning experiments. I believe this will be a mistake, generally, and an ineffective move anyway. The technology is fairly simple; others will pick it up. In Latin American countries or on offshore islands, clinics will offer the service at a hefty charge. Underground, without legal oversight, we will indeed see some tragedies and even horrors.

Bioethics is a field with many practitioners but few obviously qualified savants. Often the bans that spring from such federal committees prove ill-advised, their only long-term effects negative. This was the case with the two-year moratorium on recombinant DNA, which simply slowed the field without deciding anything. So did similar bans on selling organs or blood, and I predict, so shall the recent Clinton prohibition on using human

embryos in federally backed medical research. The ultimate price for these momentary interruptions — and so far they have always been momentary — is lives lost because the resultant technology arrives too late for some patients.

Bioethicists tend to see problems everywhere, and saying no gives them visible power. Letting technology evolve willy-nilly, responding to what people want — maybe even people without advanced degrees! — gives bioethicists no perks or prominence; unsurprising, then, that they seldom go that route. They aren't the patients clinging to life, or infertile, or stunted in some potentially fixable way.

They also tend to think collectively, omitting the inconvenient needs of real people. Bioethics professor George Annas of Boston University flatly demands, "I want to put the burden of proof on scientists to show us why society needs this before society permits them to go ahead and [do] it." Note that he does not require this rule in his own work, including testing the above sentence by its own standards. Instead, Virginia Postrel has noted of Annas and many others, "We will hear the natural equated with the good, and fatalism lauded as matu-

rity. That is a sentiment about which both green romantics and pious conservatives agree."

Indeed. We would save ourselves much trouble if we could agree that the proper place for most bioethical thought lies in counseling those affected, not in dictating the spectrum of possibilities.

Cloning arouses anxieties stemming from a general uncertainty with the very concept of the self. Legally, even the mind-body unity seems shaky. In 1991 the California Supreme Court decided that a cancer patient did not have a right to share in the profits from UCLA's use of his diseased cells to produce new drugs. This meant that a patient does not even own his own body, and so his integral self is not simply bodily.

Consciousness seems to us to be slippery and yet intuitively obvious. We feel ourselves to be the same person all along our life-trajectory, unique and self-contained. Just as an ant colony or a baseball game has an integrity even as its insects or players change, we have an irreducible selfness.

Of course, such assertions are hard to prove. (Indeed, proving who you are is done by showing a partial copy of yourself — fingerprints, or a

drivers' license.) We all readily assent to knowing that we experience a continuous self.

Yet we fall asleep every day, a loss of conscious continuity. People who lapse into year-long comas can emerge again with the same personality. Still better, patients in brain operations who have their heads chilled down until they are legally brain dead, with no alpha and beta rhythms at all, are still themselves when they are warmed back up and revived. Their memories and mannerisms come through intact.

Over what spans of time and condition can we keep our sense of selfness unbroken?

The bedrock issue of preserving one's selfness then intersects the increasing interest in prolonging life — if necessary by either freezing oneself after death, or even "uploading" into computers.

Making yourself into a computer file and programs fits one present picture of our Self: the mind is software running on the hardware of the brain. The Self, then, is whatever program is running on your customized operating system, one developed by the rubs and rituals of your upbringing.

Of course, such an analogy is suspect, for our brains self-program

themselves, laying down memories in chemical pathways that are not simply erased, and aren't under our conscious control.

But the uploader's central point is that one can copy a mind much as a tape copies a piece of music, without knowing how music is made. The brain, they say, is the same.

Minds are self-organizing, evolving systems, however, unlike fixed musical works; but the image is striking, still. Where does it lead us?

The first novel about uploading, Charles Platt's 1991 *The Silicon Man*, does not directly confront a basic problem of copying, Levinson's Paradox: To the degree that a copy approaches perfection, it defeats itself. In being an absolutely perfect copy — so that no one can tell it from the original — it transforms the original into a duplicate. This means the perfect copy is no longer a perfect copy, because it has obliterated, rather than preserved, the uniqueness of the original — and thus failed to copy a central aspect of the original.

A perfect, artificial human intelligence would inevitably have this effect on its natural original. If author Paul Levinson pointed out this feature, hinting that it portended even deeper problems, in

the 1980s. While the paradox may seem a mere logical quibble, it underlines how little we know of how much fidelity to the original truly implies that the self has been preserved.

No mere technological improvement can remove this logical difficulty. Given enough memory maintenance, we could maintain numerical versions of ourselves, assuming that the recording process would not destroy our fleshy originals.

This raises great troubles, though. Termed variously Dittos, Duplicates or Copies, these digital entities lead a tenuous existence. Real, fleshy folk would decisively reject the Copy Fallacy: the belief that a digital Self was identical to the Original, and that an Original should feel that a Ditto itself somehow carried them forward into immortality. (As long as nobody pulls the plug, of course.)

Refuting this Copy Fallacy is straightforward. Imagine yourself promised that you will be resurrected digitally, immediately after your death. Assign a price tag you will pay for that, insurance of a sort. Then imagine the guy who sells you on this notion saying that, uh, well, maybe it would not be started right away, but sometime in the future...we promise. As that date

recedes, people's enthusiasm for paying for Self Copies dims — demonstrating that it is the hope of continuity they unconsciously relish.

As an identical twin, I have never bought the Copy Fallacy in any form. Though my brother and I have diverged in personality and appearance, due to differing environments and histories, for the first twenty years of our lives few could tell us apart. He and I could, though, and that's the nub of the argument: the Self is defined internally, not externally.

In the end, Copies benefit themselves, not the dead; machine immortality is more like having your twin live on, not yourself.

Some thinkers about computer identities, in the years since publication of *The Silicon Man*, have begun to push an agenda of Copy rights — the expansion of classical liberty into the digital wilderness. Dittos still will be people, the argument goes, with different skills and drawbacks, rather like the "differently abled."

The freedom to change your own clock speed, morph into anything, or even remake your own mind, goes along with the admitted liability of not being physically real. Unable to literally walk the streets, they will be like amputated souls.

Platt envisioned tele-presencing and some digital prosthetics that might reach in limited fashion into the concrete universe, but these would be recreations; if a Ditto feared for its life, why lurk fully in the dangerous real world?

Also, "rights" for Dittos get tied up with our own deep-seated fears — of digital immortals who amass wealth and like fungus reach into every avenue of natural, real lives; parasites, nothing less. Platt plainly foresees issues looming over the horizon, as soon as the digital world amasses financial power.

Running a Ditto of your Self, then giving it autonomy, means it could get rich and also change itself. Your Ditto could shape its own motivations, goals, habits, edit away memories and tastes. It then stops mimicking your own evolution. Your Ditto could erase any liking for Impressionist Opera and overlay instead a passion for rap, enjoying rhythms that would have bored the true Self into a coma. The easy access of a Ditto to his entire underpinning — unlike ourselves, with much of our personality lying in our subconscious and not consciously fixable — implies constant change, personality tinkering, perhaps worse.

...

Is consciousness just a property of special algorithms, sliding sheets of information, digital packets jumping through conceptual hoops? How we envision our selfness depends on this huge question, now a hot topic.

Does a model simulating watching a sunset have to feel the same way its Original did? Why doubt simulated consciousness, when nobody asked the same question of programs that balance checkbooks? Such issues perplex many philosophers today, but I think feeling one's way through them in fiction is a rather more revealing path than abstract argument.

Consider that a Ditto is forcefully reminded that he is not the Original, but a mere fog of digits. All that gives him a sense of Self as continuity is the endless stepping forward of pattern. In people, the "real algorithm" computes itself by firing synapses, ringing nerves, getting the feel of continuity from the dance of cause and effect.

Dittos on the other hand are simply time-stepped forward, in processes that could just as easily run backward without the Ditto even noticing. Even time is fragile, a convention, in a digital universe.

Dittos surely would stand on shaky metaphysical ground here. Would we find that a Ditto fidgeted

out of pure self-anxiety? His digital stress chem shoots up, metabolics lurch, heart-sims hammer, lungs flutter in intense uneasiness? Would typical Dittos talk incessantly, acutely uncomfortable, and make odd demands of their keepers? — that they be edited, truncated, improved, perhaps finally killed?

The dream of bodiless existence does not imply the end of the human condition, if we are still truly simulating humans.

Consider how well one would have to describe what our everyday life is like. Making a Ditto's body seem right to its critical intelligence demands sets of overlapping rules. After all, the Ditto remembers what a pleasure eating, say, used to be, back there in the gritty, real world.

As he (or she) chews, teeth have to thunk down on food, saliva squirt to greet the munched mass, enzymes started to work to extract the right nutrient ratios. The program can bypass the involved stomach and colon processes, simplifying into a satisfying concentration of blood sugars, giving him a carbohydrate lift, a pleasant electrolyte balance, hormones and stabilizers all calculated with patchwork templates for the appropriate emotional levels.

The body becomes a set of reci-

pes for seeming like oneself. No underlying physics or biology at work, just a good-enough fake, put in by hand — the unseen hand of some Programmer God. So emerges an existential angst as profound as anything Camus felt, surely.

All other detail can be discarded, once the subroutines get the right effect, simulating the tingling of nerve endings. All this is to ground a visceral sense of Self, seemingly rock-solid, though really just a patched-in slug of digits, orchestrated by a mosaic of ten thousand ad hoc rules, running together.

So much effort, just to approximate what we get for free every day!

But of course, digital selves need not age or die, as long as somebody pays the power bill and doesn't pull the plug on us. Ordinary fear of mortal death will become a fear of being cut off, your Self never run again. Each interruption in running the Self will come to a Ditto as a possible final end, for he cannot act in the world while not running.

Indeed, when booted up again, he might not be able to tell he had suffered a hesitation-death, or whether it was a mere second or a hundred years of real time. This is a kind of heavenly eternity, to some. To me it seems like a hell of existential anxiety. If to us twins, singletons have to go through life with

rather rickety mental identities, think of a Ditto's lot!

But the possibilities! proclaim some of the uploading Digiterati.

With enough computing space and speed, one could be King Me the Magnanimous, endowing many proto-Michelangelos with creative time...or perhaps becoming Michelangelo oneself, with time. What if genius is just a matter of accumulating greater computing capacity?

Rebuilding yourself from the ground up then emerges as at least a hope. That which is buried in the digits might be harvested, changed. Learn to freeze-frame your own emotional states, like painting a self-portrait for study later. Perhaps that could help understand oneself, like a botanist putting himself on a slide and under a microscope. Could slices of the Self, multiplied, be the Self? With even emotions as programs?

Such ideas run through Platt's seminal book. They provoked later writers like Greg Egan, who in *Permutation City* sees a special SelfHood Suite menu, eerie in its temptations. With it one could present interior-configurations as separate subroutines, elements in the modeled brain. Here, grouped under headings — Qualms, Anxieties, Aversions, Likes, Habits,

Unconscious Appeals — could rest items he could edit, improve, erase entirely. Not knowing what the Self is, which irreducible kernel of menu items define oneself, for oneself, suggests that Dittos will be tempted into rapt navel gazing.

Given the chance, which would you choose in pursuit of "immortality" — uploading or cryonics? Forget about the probabilities of success — each seems fraught with peril. (In an earlier column I estimated that the probability of being successfully frozen and later revived by future technology was at best one percent. A small chance, but infinitely larger than plain, flat zero...)

Uploading gives a pure Copy; cryonics yields your own brain, no doubt altered by much chemistry and microengineering necessary to pull your consciousness back out of the ice.

Which is truer? As far as I know, sf has yet to confront this question.

My intuitive choice is cryonics. At least in its perfect form, you recover the true you, the original synapses and holistic organization of the hopelessly complex brain. With uploading, you at best get a model of yourself, a rendering in 0s and 1s that reproduces for an outside audience — though not including you, the true best critic — your basic personality and memories.

Of course, having your brain frozen leaves out much: your physiology, your body instincts, will have to come from some body grown from your own cells (the reproductive ones, probably) to accompany the revival of your brain.

Here the cloning of humans is essential. Current cryonics organizations (I know of four) routinely preserve not just the head of their patients, but the reproductive organs and other body samples.

The idea is to send forward in time as much information as possible. While some patients elect to have their entire bodies frozen in liquid nitrogen, a far more expensive proposition, most take the head-only route.

They anticipate that a body can be cloned for them at some far future date when it will not only be technically possible, but even fairly inexpensive. Even more, they trust that no medical prohibitions will have halted cloning research. Further, cryonicists hope that cloning technology will have avoided the clear dangers.

But if a body is grown for a defrosted and repaired head, what becomes of the body's head? Was it deliberately stunted from "birth," so that it never developed as a conscious human? It seems unlikely that anyone could grow a body in

some chemical vat, no matter how sophisticated, without using the many complex functions that the brain provides for that body.

So even to envision cryonics proceeding, one must require that future society has solved both scientific and moral questions about selfness and its implications. This is not an easy future to foresee, not at all.

But remember that the future is infinite, or at least very long indeed. Note how primitive medicine was a mere century ago. A few more centuries of steady growth could yield a social and philosophical landscape beyond our present comprehension.

Suppose cryonics could work. You would have grabbed back from time's maw the pure raw stuff of Self. Cybernetics gives a digital model, one always suspect because it has to choose how to configure the myriad data points of any brain-readout.

Choice begets the particular, and to have the whole Self, you must have the true, full general Self, in whatever deep labyrinths it lies.

Comments and objections to this column are welcome. Please send them to Gregory Benford, Physics Department, Univ. Calif., Irvine, CA 92717. email: gbenford@uci.edu ☞

Stephen King is a man who knows the power of the written word. Thanks to him, "Cujo" has come to denote any scary dog, wannabe psychos all growl "redrum," and "Carrie" is the one person who had a worse time at the prom than you did. Dinky Earnshaw is another person who knows the power of the written word, as you'll see in this terrific new novella.

Everything's Eventual

By Stephen King

1

I 'VE GOT A GOOD JOB NOW, and no reason to feel glum. No more hanging out with the gumbyheads at the Supr Savr, policing up the Kart Korral and get-

ting bothered by assholes like Skipper. Skipper's munching the old dirt sandwich these days, but one thing I have learned in my nineteen years on this Planet Earth is don't relax, there are Skippers everywhere.

Ditto no more pulling pizza patrol on rainy nights, driving my old Ford with the bad muffler, freezing my ass off with the driver's side window down and a little Italian flag sticking out on a wire. Like somebody in Harkerville was going to salute. Pizza Roma. Quarter tips from people who don't even see you, because most of their mind's still on the TV football game. Driving for Pizza Roma was the lowest point, I think. Since then I've even had a ride in a private jet, so how could things be bad?

"This is what comes of leaving school without a diploma," Ma would say during my Delivery Dan stint. And, "You've got this to look forward to *for the rest of your life.*" Good old Ma. On and on, until I actually thought about writing her one of those special letters. As I say, that was the low point. You know what Mr. Sharpton told me that night in his car? "It's not just a job, Dink, it's a goddam adventure." And he was right. Whatever he might have been wrong about, he was right about that.

I suppose you're wondering about the salary of this famous job. Well, I got to tell you, there's not much money in it. Might as well get that right up front. But a job isn't just about money, or getting ahead. That's what Mr. Sharpton told me. Mr. Sharpton said that a real job is about the fringe benefits. He said that's where the power is.

Mr. Sharpton. I only saw him that once, sitting behind the wheel of his big old Mercedes-Benz, but sometimes once is enough.

Take that any way you want. Any old way at all.

2

I've got a house, okay? My very own house. That's fringe benefit number one. I call Ma sometimes, ask how her bad leg is, shoot the shit, but I've never invited her over here, although Harkerville is only seventy or so miles away and I know she's practically busting a gut with curiosity. I don't even have to go see her unless I want to. Mostly I don't want to. If you knew my mother, you wouldn't want to, either. Sit there in that living room with her while she talks about all her relatives and whines about her puffy leg. Also I never noticed how much the house smelled of catshit until I got out of it. I'm never going to have a pet. Pets bite the big one.

Mostly I just stay here. It's only got one bedroom, but it's still an excellent house. *Eventual*, as Pug used to say. He was the one guy at the Supr Savr I liked. When he wanted to say something was really good, Pug'd never say it was awesome, like most people do; he'd say it was eventual. How funny is that? The old Pugmeister. I wonder how he's doing. Okay, I suppose. But I can't call him and make sure. I can call my Ma, and I have an emergency number if anything ever goes wrong or if I think somebody's getting nosy about what's not their business, but I can't buzz any of my

old friends (as if any of them besides Pug gave Shit One about Dinky Earnshaw). Mr. Sharpton's rules.

But never mind that. Let's go back to my house here in Columbia City. How many nineteen-year-old high school dropouts do you know who have their own houses? Plus a new car? Only a Honda, true, but the first three numbers on the odometer are still zeroes, and that's the important part. It has a radio/tape-player, and I don't slide in behind the wheel wondering if the goddam thing'll start, like I always did with the Ford, which Skipper used to make fun of. The Assholemobile, he called it. Why are there so many Skippers in the world? That's what I really wonder about.

I do get *some* money, by the way. More than enough to meet my needs. Check this out. I watch *As the World Turns* every day while I'm eating my lunch, and on Thursdays, about halfway through the show, I hear the clack of the mail-slot. I don't do anything then, I'm not supposed to. Like Mr. Sharpton said, "Them's the rules, Dink."

I just watch the rest of my show. The exciting stuff on the soaps always happens around the weekends — murders on Fridays, fucking on Mondays — but I watch right to the end every day, just the same. I'm especially careful to stay in the living room until the end on Thursdays. On Thursdays I don't even go out to the kitchen for another glass of milk. When *World* is over, I turn off the TV for a while — Oprah Winfrey comes on next, I hate her show, all that sitting-around-talking shit is for the Mas of the world — and go out to the front hall.

Lying on the floor under the mail-slot, there's always a plain white envelope, sealed. Nothing written on the front. Inside there'll be either fourteen five-dollar bills or seven ten-dollar bills. That's my money for the week. Here's what I do with it. I go to the movies twice, always in the afternoon, when it's just \$4.50. That's \$9. On Saturday I fill up my Honda with gas, and that's usually about \$7. I don't drive much. I'm not invested in it, as Pug would say. So now we're up to \$16. I'll eat out maybe four times at Mickey D's, either at breakfast (Egg McMuffin, coffee, two hash browns) or at dinner (Quarter Pounder with Cheese, never mind that Arch shit, what dimbulb thought that one up). Once a week I put on chinos and a button-up shirt and see how the other half lives — have a fancy meal at a place like Adam's Ribs or the Chuck Wagon. All of that goes me about

\$25 and now we're up to \$41. Then I might go by News Plus and buy a stroke book or two, nothing really kinky, just your usual like *Variations* or *Penthouse*. I have tried writing these mags down on DINKY'S DAYBOARD, but with no success. I can buy them myself, and they don't disappear on cleaning day or anything, but they don't *show up*, if you see what I'm getting at, like most other stuff does. I guess Mr. Sharpton's cleaners don't like to buy dirty stuff (pun). Also, I can't get to any of the sex stuff on the Internet. I have tried, but it's blocked out, somehow. Usually things like that are easy to deal with — you go under or around the roadblocks if you can't bash straight through — but this is different.

Not to belabor the point, but I can't dial 900 numbers on the phone, either. The auto-dialer works, of course, and if I want to call somebody just at random, anywhere in the world, and shoot the shit with them for a while, that's okay. That works. But the 900 numbers don't. You just get a busy. Probably just as well. In my experience, thinking about sex is like scratching poison ivy. You only spread it around. Besides, sex is no big deal, at least for me. It's there, but it isn't *eventual*. Still, considering what I'm doing, that little prudery streak is sort of weird. Almost funny...except I seem to have lost my sense of humor on the subject. A few others, as well.

Oh well, back to the budget.

If I get a *Variations*, that's four bucks and we're up to \$45. Some of the money that's left I might use to buy a CD, although I don't have to, or a candy-bar or two (I know I shouldn't, because my complexion still blows dead rats, although I'm almost not a teenager anymore). I think of calling out for a pizza or for Chinese sometimes, but it's against TransCorp's rules. Also, I would feel weird doing it, like a member of the oppressing class. I have delivered pizza, remember. I know what a sucky job it is. Still, if I *could* order in, the pizza guy wouldn't leave *this* house with a quarter tip. I'd lay five on him, watch his eyes light up.

But you're starting to see what I mean about not needing a lot of cash money, aren't you? When Thursday morning rolls around again, I usually have at least eight bucks left, and sometimes it's more like twenty. What I do with the coins is drop them down the storm-drain in front of my house. I am aware that this would freak the neighbors out if they saw me doing it (I'm a high school dropout, but I didn't leave because I was stupid, thank you very much), so I take out the blue plastic recycling basket with

the newspapers in it (and sometimes with a *Penthouse* or *Variations* buried halfway down the stack, I don't keep that shit around for long, who would), and while I'm putting it down on the curb, I open the hand with the change in it, and through the grate in the gutter it goes. Tinkle-tinkle-tinkle-splash. Like a magician's trick. Now you see it, now you don't. Someday that drain will get clogged up, they'll send a guy down there and he'll think he won the fucking lottery; unless there's a flood or something that pushes all the change down to the waste treatment plant, or wherever it goes. By then I'll be gone. I'm not going to spend my life in Columbia City, I can tell you that. I'm leaving, and soon. One way or the other.

The currency is easier. I just poke it down the garbage disposal in the kitchen. Another magic trick, presto-change-o, money into lettuce. You probably think that's very weird, running money through the sink-pig. I did, too, at first. But you get used to just about anything after you do it awhile, and besides, there's always another seventy falling through the letter-slot. The rule is simple: no squirreling it away. End the week broke. Besides, it's not millions we're talking about, only eight or ten bucks a week. Chump-change, really.

3

DINKY'S DAYBOARD. That's another fringe benefit. I write down whatever I want during the week, and I get everything I ask for (except sex-mags, as I told you). Maybe I'll get bored with that eventually, but right now it's like having Santa Claus all year round. Mostly what I write down is groceries, like anyone does on their kitchen chalkboard, but by no means is groceries all.

I might, for instance, write down "New Bruce Willis Video" or "New Weezer CD" or something like that. A funny thing about that Weezer CD, since we're on the subject. I happened to go into Toons Xpress one Friday after my movie was over (I always go to the show on Friday afternoons, even if there's nothing I really want to see, because that's when the cleaners come), just killing time inside because it was rainy and that squashed going to the park, and while I was looking at the new releases, this kid asks a clerk about the new Weezer CD. The clerk tells him it won't be in for another ten days or so, but I'd had it since the Friday before.

Fringe benefits, like I say.

If I write down "sport shirt" on the DAYBOARD, there it is when I get back to the house on Friday night, always in one of the nice earth-tone colors I like. If I write down "new jeans" or "chinos," I get those. All stuff from The Gap, which is where I'd go myself, if I had to do stuff like that. If I want a certain kind of after-shave lotion or cologne, I write the name on DINKY'S DAYBOARD and it's on the bathroom counter when I get home. I don't date, but I'm a fool for cologne. Go figure.

Here's something you'll laugh at, I bet. Once I wrote down "Rembrandt Painting" on the DAYBOARD. Then I spent the afternoon at the movies and walking in the park, watching people making out and dogs catching Frisbees, thinking how eventual it would be if the cleaners actually brought me my own fucking Rembrandt. Think of it, a genuine Old Master on the wall of a house in the Sunset Knoll section of Columbia City. How eventual would *that* be?

And it happened, in a manner of speaking. My Rembrandt was hung on the living room wall when I got home, over the sofa where the velvet clowns used to be. My heart was beating about two hundred a minute as I walked across the room toward it. When I got closer, I saw it was just a copy...you know, a reproduction. I was disappointed, but not very. I mean, it *was* a Rembrandt. Just not an *original* Rembrandt.

Another time, I wrote "Autographed Photo of Nicole Kidman" on the DAYBOARD. I think she's the best looking actress alive, she just gets me on so much. And when I got home that day, there was a publicity still of her on the fridge, held there by a couple of those little vegetable magnets. And that time it was the real deal. I know because of the way it was signed: "To Dinky Earnshaw, with love & kisses from Nicole."

Oh, baby. Oh, honey.

Tell you something, my friend — if I worked hard and really wanted it, there might be a *real* Rembrandt on my wall someday. Sure. In a job like this, there is nowhere to go but up. In a way, that's the scary part.

I never have to make grocery lists. The cleaners know what I like — Stouffer's frozen dinners, especially that boil-in-the-bag stuff they call

creamed chipped beef and Ma always called shit on a shingle, frozen strawberries, whole milk, pre-formed hamburger patties that you just have to slap in a hot frying pan (I hate playing with raw meat), Dole puddings, the ones that come in plastic cups (bad for my complexion but I love em), ordinary food like that. If I want something special, I write it down on DINKY'S DAYBOARD.

Once I asked for a homemade apple pie, specifically *not* from the supermarket, and when I came back that night around the time it was getting dark, my pie was in the fridge with the rest of the week's groceries. Only it wasn't wrapped up, it was just sitting there on a blue plate. That's how I knew it was homemade. I was a little hesitant about eating it at first, not knowing where it came from and all, and then I decided I was being stupid. A person doesn't really know where *supermarket* food comes from, if it comes to that. Right? I mean, we assume it's okay because it's wrapped up or in a can or "Double-sealed for your protection," but anyone could have been handling it with dirty fingers before it was double-sealed, or sneezing great big whoops of booger-breath on it, or even wiping their asses with it. I don't mean to gross you out, but it's true, isn't it? The world is full of strangers, and a lot of them are "up to no good." I have had personal experience of this, believe me.

Anyway, I tried the pie and it was delicious. I ate half of it Friday night and the rest on Saturday morning, while I was running the numbers in Cheyenne, Wyoming. Most of Saturday night I spent on the toilet, shitting my brains out from all those apples, I guess, but I didn't care. The pie was worth it. "Like mother used to make" is what people say, but it can't be my mother they say it about. My Ma would burn boiling water.

5

I never have to write down underwear on the DAYBOARD. Every five weeks or so the old drawers disappear and there are brand new Hanes jockey shorts in my bureau, four three-packs still in their plastic bags. Double-sealed for my protection, ha-ha. Toilet paper, laundry soap, dishwasher soap, I never have to write any of that shit down. It just appears.

Very eventual, don't you think?

I have never seen the cleaners, any more than I have ever seen the guy (or maybe it's a gal) who delivers my seventy bucks every Thursday during *As the World Turns*. I never want to see them, either. I don't need to, for one thing. For another, yes, okay, I'm afraid of them. Just like I was afraid of Mr. Sharpton in his big gray Mercedes on the night I went out to meet him. So sue me.

I don't eat lunch in my house on Fridays. I watch *As the World Turns*, then jump in my car and drive into town. I get a burger at Mickey D's, then go to a movie, then to the park if the weather is good. I like the park. It's a good place to think, and these days I've got an awful lot to think about.

If the weather is bad, I go to the mall. Now that the days are beginning to shorten, I'm thinking about taking up bowling again. It'd be something to do on Friday afternoons, at least. I used to go there with Pug.

I sort of miss Pug. I wish I could call him, just shoot the shit, tell him some of the stuff that's been going on. Like about that guy Neff, for instance.

Oh, well, spit in the ocean.

While I'm away, the cleaners are doing my house from wall to wall and top to bottom — wash the dishes (although I'm pretty good about that myself), wash the floors, wash the dirty clothes, change the sheets, put out fresh towels, restock the fridge, get any of the incidentals that are written on the DAYBOARD. It's like living in a hotel with the world's most efficient (not to mention eventual) maid service.

The one place they don't mess around with much is the study off the dining room. I keep that room fairly dark, the shades always pulled, and they have never raised them to let in so much as a crack of daylight, like they do in the rest of the house. It never smells of Lemon Pledge in there, either, although every other room just about reeks of it on Friday nights. Sometimes it's so bad I have these sneezing fits. It's not an allergy; more like a fucking protest demonstration.

Someone vacuums the floor in there, and they empty the wastepaper basket, but no one has ever moved any of the papers that I keep on the desk, no matter how cluttered-up and junky-looking they are. Once I put a little piece of tape over where the drawer above the knee-hole opens, but it was

still there, unbroken, when I got back home that night. I don't keep anything top secret in that drawer, you understand; I just wanted to know.

Also, if the computer and modem are on when I leave, they're still on when I come back, the VDT showing one of the screen-saver programs (usually the one of the people doing stuff behind their blinds in this high-rise building, because that's my favorite). If my stuff was off when I left, it's off when I come back. They don't mess around in Dinky's study.

Maybe the cleaners are a little afraid of me, too.

7

I got the call that changed my life just when I thought the combination of Ma and delivering for Pizza Roma was going to drive me crazy. I know how melodramatic that sounds, but in this case, it's true. The call came on my night off. Ma was out with her girlfriends, playing Bingo at the Reservation, all of them smoking up a storm and no doubt laughing every time the caller pulled B-12 out of the hopper and said, "All right, ladies, it's time to take your vitamins." Me, I was watching a Clint Eastwood movie on TNT and wishing I was anywhere else on Planet Earth. Saskatchewan, even.

The phone rings, and I think, oh good, it's Pug, gotta be, and so when I pick it up I say in my smoothest voice, "You have reached the Church of Any Eventuality, Harkerville branch, Reverend Dink speaking."

"Hello, Mr. Earnshaw," a voice says back. It was one I'd never heard before, but it didn't seem the least put-out or puzzled by my bullshit. I was mortified enough for both of us, though. Have you ever noticed that when you do something like that on the phone — try to be cool right from the pickup — it's never the person you expected on the other end? Once I heard about this girl who picked up the phone and said "Hi, it's Helen, and I want you to fuck me raw" because she was sure it was her boyfriend, only it turned out to be her father. That story is probably made up, like the one about the alligators in the New York sewers (or the letters in *Penthouse*), but you get the point.

"Oh, I'm sorry," I say, too flustered to wonder how the owner of this strange voice knows that Reverend Dink is also Mr. Earnshaw, actual name Richard Ellery Earnshaw. "I thought you were someone else."

"I *am* someone else," the voice says, and although I didn't laugh then, I did later on. Mr. Sharpton was someone else, all right. Seriously, eventually someone else.

"Can I help you?" I asked. "If you wanted my mother, I'll have to take a message, because she's —"

"—out playing Bingo, I know. In any case, I want you, Mr. Earnshaw. I want to offer you a job."

For a moment I was too surprised to say anything. Then it hit me — some sort of phone-scam. "I got a job," I go. "Sorry."

"Delivering pizza?" he says, sounding amused. "Well, I suppose. If you call that a job."

"Who are you, mister?" I ask.

"My name is Sharpton. And now let me 'cut through the bullshit,' as you might say, Mr. Earnshaw. Dink? May I call you Dink?"

"Sure," I said. "Can I call you Sharpie?"

"Call me whatever you want, just listen."

"I'm listening." I was, too. Why not? The movie on the tube was Coogan's *Bluff*, not one of Clint's better efforts.

"I want to make you the best job offer you've ever had, and the best one you probably ever will have. It's not just a job, Dink, it's an adventure."

"Gee, where have I heard that before?" I had a bowl of popcorn in my lap, and I tossed a handful into my mouth. This was turning into fun, sort of.

"Others promise; I deliver. But this is a discussion we must have face to face. Will you meet me?"

"Are you a queer?" I asked.

"No." There was a touch of amusement in his voice. Just enough so that it was hard to disbelieve. And I was already in the hole, so to speak, from the smartass way I'd answered the phone. "My sexual orientation doesn't come into this."

"Why're you yanking my chain, then? I don't know *anybody* who'd call me at nine-thirty in the fucking night and offer me a job."

"Do me a favor. Put the phone down and go look in your front hall."

Crazier and crazier. But what did I have to lose? I did what he said, and found an envelope lying there. Someone had poked it through the mail-slot while I was watching Clint Eastwood chase Don Stroud through

Central Park. The first envelope of many, although of course I didn't know that then. I tore it open, and seven ten-dollar bills fell out into my hand. Also a note.

This can be the beginning of a great career!

I went back into the living room, still looking at the money. Know how weirded-out I was? I almost sat on my bowl of popcorn. I saw it at the last second, set it aside, and plopped back on the couch. I picked up the phone, really sort of expecting Sharpton to be gone, but when I said hello, he answered.

"What's this all about?" I asked him. "What's the seventy bucks for? I'm keeping it, but not because I think I owe you anything. I didn't fucking ask for anything."

"The money is absolutely yours," Sharpton says, "with not a string in the world attached. But I'll let you in on a secret, Dink — a job isn't just about money. A real job is about the fringe benefits. That's where the power is."

"If you say so."

"I absolutely do. And all I ask is that you meet me and hear a little more. I'll make you an offer that will change your life, if you take it. That will open the door to a *new* life, in fact. Once I've made that offer, you can ask all the questions you like. Although I must be honest and say you probably won't get all the *answers* you'd like."

"And if I just decide to walk away?"

"I'll shake your hand, clap you on the back, and wish you good luck."

"When did you want to meet?" Part of me — most of me — still thought all this was a joke, but there was a minority opinion forming by then. There was the money, for one thing; two weeks' worth of tips driving for Pizza Roma, and that's if business was good. But mostly it was the way Sharpton talked. He sounded like he'd been to school...and I don't mean at Sheep's Rectum State College over in Van Drusen, either. And really, what harm could there be? Since Skipper's accident, there was no one on Planet Earth who wanted to take after me in a way that was dangerous or painful. Well, Ma, I suppose, but her only weapon was her mouth...and she wasn't into elaborate practical jokes. Also, I couldn't see her parting with seventy dollars. Not when there was still a Bingo game in the vicinity.

"Tonight," he said. "Right now, in fact."

"All right, why not? Come on over. I guess if you can drop an envelope full of tens through the mail slot, you don't need me to give you the address."

"Not at your house. I'll meet you in the Supr Savr parking lot."

My stomach dropped like an elevator with the cables cut, and the conversation stopped being the least bit funny. Maybe this was some kind of setup — something with cops in it, even. I told myself no one could know about Skipper, least of all the cops, but Jesus. There was the letter; Skipper could have left the letter lying around anywhere. Nothing in it anyone could make out (except for his sister's name, but there are millions of Debbies in the world), no more than anyone could've made out the stuff I wrote on the sidewalk outside Mrs. Bukowski's yard...or so I would have said before the goddam phone rang. But who could be absolutely sure? And you know what they say about a guilty conscience. I didn't exactly feel guilty about Skipper, not then, but still...

"The Supr Savr's kind of a weird place for a job interview, don't you think? Especially when it's been closed since eight o'clock."

"That's what makes it good, Dink. Privacy in a public place. I'll park right by the Kart Korral. You'll know the car — it's a big gray Mercedes."

"I'll know it because it'll be the only one there," I said, but he was already gone.

I hung up and put the money in my pocket, almost without realizing I was doing it. I was sweating lightly all over my body. The voice on the phone wanted to meet me by the Kart Korral, where Skipper had so often teased me. Where he had once mashed my fingers between a couple of shopping carts, laughing when I screamed. That hurts the worst, getting your fingers mashed. Two of the nails had turned black and fallen off. That was when I'd made up my mind to try the letter. And the results had been unbelievable. Still, if Skipper Brannigan had a ghost, the Kart Korral was likely where it would hang out, looking for fresh victims to torture. The voice on the phone couldn't have picked that place by accident. I tried to tell myself that was bullshit, that coincidences happened all the time, but I just didn't believe it. Mr. Sharpton knew about Skipper. Somehow he knew.

I was afraid to meet him, but I didn't see what choice I had. If nothing else, I ought to find out what else he knew. And who he might tell.

I got up, put on my coat (it was early spring then, and cold at night — although it seems to me that it's always cold at night in western Pennsylvania), started out the door, then went back and left a note for Ma. "Went out to see a couple of guys," I wrote. "Will be back by midnight." I intended to be back well before midnight, but that note seemed like a good idea. I wouldn't let myself think too closely about why it seemed like a good idea, not then, but I can own up to it now: if something happened to me, something bad, I wanted to make sure Ma would call the police.

8

There are two kinds of scared — at least that's my theory. There's TV-scared, and there's real-scared. I think we go through most of our lives only getting TV-scared. Like when we're waiting for our blood tests to come back from the doctor or when we're walking home from the library in the dark and thinking about bad guys in the bushes. We don't get real-scared about shit like that, because we know in our heart of hearts that the blood tests will come back clean and there won't be any bad guys in the bushes. Why? Because stuff like that only happens to the people on TV.

When I saw that big gray Mercedes, the only car in about an acre of empty parking lot, I got real-scared for the first time since the thing in the box room with Skipper Brannigan. That time was the closest we ever came to really getting into it.

Mr. Sharpton's ride was sitting under the light of the lot's yellow mercury-vapor lamps, a big old Krautmobil, at least a 450 and probably a 500, the kind of car that costs a hundred and twenty grand these days. Sitting there next to the Kart Korral (now almost empty for the night, all the carts except for one poor old three-wheeled cripple safely locked up inside) with its parking lights on and white exhaust drifting up into the air. Engine rumbling like a sleepy cat.

I drove toward it, my heart pumping slow but hard and a taste like pennies in my throat. I wanted to just mat the accelerator of my Ford (which in those days always smelled like a pepperoni pizza) and get the hell out of there, but I couldn't get rid of the idea that the guy knew about Skipper. I could tell myself there was nothing to know, that Charles "Skipper" Brannigan had either had an accident or committed suicide, the

cops weren't sure which (they couldn't have known him very well; if they had, they would have thrown the idea of suicide right out the window — guys like Skipper don't off themselves, not at the age of twenty-three they don't), but that didn't stop the voice from yammering away that I was in trouble, someone had figured it out, someone had gotten hold of the letter and figured it out.

That voice didn't have logic on its side, but it didn't need to. It had good lungs and just outscrambled logic. I parked beside the idling Mercedes and rolled my window down. At the same time, the driver's side window of the Mercedes rolled down. We looked at each other, me and Mr. Sharpton, like a couple of old friends meeting at the Hi-Hat Drive-In.

I don't remember much about him now. That's weird, considering all the time I've spent thinking about him since, but it's the truth. Only that he was thin, and that he was wearing a suit. A good one, I think, although judging stuff like that's not my strong point. Still, the suit eased me a little. I guess that, unconsciously, I had this idea that a suit means business, and jeans and a T-shirt means fuckery.

"Hello, Dink," he says. "I'm Mr. Sharpton. Come on in here and sit down."

"Why don't we just stay the way we are?" I asked. "We can talk to each other through these windows. People do it all the time."

He only looked at me and said nothing. After a few seconds of that, I turned off the Ford and got out. I don't know exactly why, but I did. I was more scared than ever, I can tell you that. Real-scared. Real as real as real. Maybe that was why he could get me to do what he wanted.

I stood between Mr. Sharpton's car and mine for a minute, looking at the Kart Korral and thinking about Skipper. He was tall, with this wavy blond hair he combed straight back from his forehead. He had pimples, and these red lips, like a girl wearing lipstick. "Hey Dinky, let's see your dinky," he'd say. Or "Hey Dinky, you want to suck my dinky?" You know, witty shit like that. Sometimes, when we were rounding up the carts, he'd chase me with one, nipping at my heels with it and going "Rmmmm! Rmmmmmm! Rmmmmmm!" like a fucking race-car. A couple of times he knocked me over. At dinner break, if I had my food on my lap, he'd bump into me good and hard, see if he could knock something onto the floor. You know the kind of stuff I'm talking about, I'm sure. It was like he'd never

gotten over those ideas of what's funny to bored kids sitting in the back row of study hall.

I had a ponytail at work, you had to wear your hair in a ponytail if you had it long, supermarket rules, and sometimes Skipper would come up behind me, grab the rubber band I used, and yank it out. Sometimes it would snarl in my hair and pull it. Sometimes it would break and snap against my neck. It got so I'd stick two or three extra rubber bands in my pants pocket before I left for work. I'd try not to think about why I was doing it, what I was putting up with. If I did, I'd probably start hating myself.

Once I turned around on my heels when he did that, and he must have seen something on my face, because his teasing smile went away and another one came up where it had been. The teasing smile didn't show his teeth, but the new one did. Out in the box room, this was, where the north wall is always cold because it backs up against the meat locker. He raised his hands and made them into fists. The other guys sat around with their lunches, looking at us, and I knew none of them would help. Not even Pug, who stands about five-feet-four anyway and weighs about a hundred and ten pounds. Skipper would have eaten him like candy, and Pug knew it.

"Come on, assface," Skipper said, smiling that smile. The broken rubber band he'd stripped out of my hair was dangling between two of his knuckles, hanging down like a little red lizard's tongue. "Come on, you want to fight me? Come on, sure. I'll fight you."

What I wanted was to ask why it had to be me he settled on, why it was me who somehow rubbed his fur wrong, why it had to be any guy. But he wouldn't have had an answer. Guys like Skipper never do. They just want to knock your teeth out. So instead, I just sat back down and picked up my sandwich again. If I tried to fight Skipper, he'd likely put me in the hospital. I started to eat, although I wasn't hungry anymore. He looked at me a second or two longer, and I thought he might go after me, anyway, but then he unrolled his fists. The broken rubber band dropped onto the floor beside a smashed lettuce crate. "You waste," Skipper said. "You fucking longhair hippie waste." Then he walked away. It was only a few days later that he mashed my fingers between two of the carts in the Korral, and a few days after that Skipper was lying on satin in the

Methodist Church with the organ playing. He brought it on himself, though. At least that's what I thought then.

"A little trip down Memory Lane?" Mr. Sharpton asked, and that jerked me back to the present. I was standing between his car and mine, standing by the Kart Korral where Skipper would never mash anyone else's fingers.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"And it doesn't matter. Hop in here, Dink, and let's have a little talk."

I opened the door of the Mercedes and got in. Man, that smell. It's leather, but not just leather. You know how, in Monopoly, there's a Get Out of Jail Free card? When you have a car that smells like Mr. Sharpton's gray Mercedes, you must have a Get Out of Everything Free card.

I took a deep breath, held it, then let it out and said, "This is eventual."

Mr. Sharpton laughed, his clean-shaven cheeks gleaming in the dashboard lights. He didn't ask what I meant; he knew. "Everything's eventual, Dink," he said. "Or can be, for the right person."

"You think so?"

"Know so." Not a shred of doubt in his voice.

"I like your tie," I said. I said it just to be saying something, but it was true, too. The tie wasn't what I'd call eventual, but it was good. You know those ties that are printed all over with skulls or dinosaurs or little golf clubs, stuff like that? Mr. Sharpton's was printed all over with swords, a firm hand holding each one up.

He laughed and ran a hand down it, kind of stroking it. "It's my lucky tie," he said. "When I put it on, I feel like King Arthur." The smile died off his face, little by little, and I realized he wasn't joking. "King Arthur, out gathering the best men there ever were. Knights to sit with him at the Round Table and remake the world."

That gave me a chill, but I tried not to show it. "What do you want with me, Art? Help you hunt for the Holy Grail, or whatever they call it?"

"A tie doesn't make a man a king," he said. "I know that, in case you were wondering."

I shifted, feeling a little uncomfortable. "Hey, I wasn't trying to put you down — "

"It doesn't matter, Dink. Really. Listen up, now: I'm two parts headhunter, two parts talent scout, and four parts walking, talking destiny. Cigarette?"

"I don't smoke."

"That's good, you'll live longer. Cigarettes are killers. Why else would people call them coffin nails?"

"You got me," I said.

"I hope so," Mr. Sharpton said, lighting up. "I most sincerely hope so. You're top-shelf goods, Dink. I doubt if you believe that, but it's true."

"What's this offer you were talking about?"

"Tell me what happened to Skipper Brannigan."

Kabam, my worst fear come true. He couldn't know, *nobody* could, but somehow he did. I only sat there feeling numb, my head pounding, my tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth like it was glued there.

"Come on, tell me." His voice seemed to be coming in from far away, like on a short-wave radio late at night.

I got my tongue back where it belonged. It took an effort, but I managed. "I didn't do anything." My own voice seemed to be coming through on that same shitty short-wave band. "Skipper had an accident, that's all. He was driving home and he went off the road. His car rolled over and went into Lockerby Stream. They found water in his lungs, so I guess he drowned, at least technically, but it was in the paper that he probably would have died, anyway. Most of his head got torn off in the rollover, or that's what people say. And some people say it wasn't an accident, that he killed himself, but I don't buy that. Skipper was...he was getting too much fun out of life to kill himself."

"Yes. You were part of his fun, weren't you?"

I didn't say anything, but my lips were trembling and there were tears in my eyes.

Mr. Sharpton reached over and put his hand on my arm. It was the kind of thing you'd expect to get from an old guy like him, sitting with him in his big German car in a deserted parking lot, but I knew when he touched me that it wasn't like that, he wasn't hitting on me. It was good to be touched the way he touched me. Until then, I didn't know how sad I was. Sometimes you don't, because it's just, I don't know, all around. I put my head down. I didn't start bawling or anything, but the tears went

running down my cheeks. The swords on his tie doubled, then tripled — three for one, such a deal.

"If you're worried that I'm a cop, you can quit. And I gave you money — that screws up any sort of prosecution that might come out of this. But even if that wasn't the case, no one would believe what really happened to young Mr. Brannigan, anyway. Not even if you confessed on nationwide TV. Would they?"

"No," I whispered. Then, louder: "I put up with a lot. Finally I couldn't put up with any more. He made me, he brought it on himself."

"Tell me what happened," Mr. Sharpton said.

"I wrote him a letter," I said. "A special letter."

"Yes, very special indeed. And what did you put in it so it could only work on him?"

I knew what he meant, but there was more to it than that. When you personalized the letters, you increased their power. You made them lethal, not just dangerous.

"His sister's name," I said. I think that was when I gave up completely. "His sister, Debbie."

9

I've always had something, some kind of deal, and I sort of knew it, but not how to use it or what its name was or what it meant. And I sort of knew I had to keep quiet about it, because other people didn't have it. I thought they might put me in the circus if they found out. Or in jail.

I remember once — vaguely, I might have been three or four, it's one of my first memories — standing by this dirty window and looking out at the yard. There was a wood-chopping block and a mailbox with a red flag, so it must have been while we were at Aunt Mabel's, out in the country. That was where we lived after my father ran off. Ma got a job in the Harkerville Fancy Bakery and we moved back to town later on, when I was five or so. We were living in town when I started school, I know that. Because of Mrs. Bukowski's dog, having to walk past that fucking canine cannibal five days a week. I'll never forget that dog. It was a boxer with a white ear. Talk about Memory Lane.

Anyway, I was looking out and there were these flies buzzing around

at the top of the window, you know how they do. I didn't like the sound, but I couldn't reach high enough, even with a rolled-up magazine, to swat them or make them go away. So instead of that, I made these two triangles on the windowpane, drawing in the dirt with the tip of my finger, and I made this other shape, a special circle-shape, to hold the triangles together. And as soon as I did that, as soon as I closed the circle, the flies — there were four or five of them — dropped dead on the windowsill. Big as jellybeans, they were — the black ones that taste like licorice. I picked one up and looked at it, but it wasn't very interesting, so I dropped it on the floor and went on looking out the window.

Stuff like that would happen from time to time, but never on purpose, never because I made it happen. The first time I remember doing something absolutely on purpose — before Skipper, I mean — was when I used my whatever-it-was on Mrs. Bukowski's dog. Mrs. Bukowski lived on the corner of our street, when we rented on Dugway Avenue. Her dog was mean and dangerous, every kid on the west side was afraid of that white-eared fuck. She kept it tied in her side yard — hell, *staked* out in her side yard is more like it — and it barked at everyone who went by. Not harmless yapping, like some dogs do, but the kind that says *If I could get you in here with me or get out there with you, I'd tear your balls off, Brewster*. Once the dog *did* get loose, and it bit the paperboy. Anyone else's dog probably would have sniffed gas for that, but Mrs. Bukowski's son was the police chief, and he fixed it up, somehow.

I hated that dog the way I hated Skipper. In a way, I suppose, it *was* Skipper. I had to go by Mrs. Bukowski's on my way to school unless I wanted to detour all the way around the block and get called a sissy-boy, and I was terrified of the way that mutt would run to the end of its rope, barking so hard that foam would fly off its teeth and muzzle. Sometimes it hit the end of the rope so hard it'd go right off its feet, *boi-yoi-yoinng*, which might have looked funny to some people but never looked funny to me; I was just scared the rope (not a chain, but a plain old piece of rope) would break one day, and the dog would jump over the low picket fence between Mrs. Bukowski's yard and Dugway Avenue, and it would rip my throat out.

Then one day I woke up with an idea. I mean it was right there. I woke up with it the way some days I'd wake up with a great big throbbing boner.

It was a Saturday, bright and early, and I didn't have to go anywhere near Mrs. Bukowski's if I didn't want to, but that day I did want to. I got out of bed and threw on my clothes just as fast as I could. I did everything fast because I didn't want to lose that idea. I would, too — I'd lose it the way you eventually lose the dreams you wake up with (or the boners you wake up with, if you want to be crude) — but right then I had the whole thing in my mind just as clear as a bell: words with triangles around them and curlicues over them, special circles to hold the whole shebang together...two or three of those, overlapping for extra strength.

I just about flew through the living room (Ma was still sleeping, I could hear her snoring, and her pink bakery uniform was hung over the shower rod in the bathroom) and went into the kitchen. Ma had a little blackboard by the phone for numbers and reminders to herself — MA'S DAYBOARD instead of DINKY'S DAYBOARD, I guess you'd say — and I stopped just long enough to gleep the piece of pink chalk hanging on a string beside it. I put it in my pocket and went out the door. I remember what a beautiful morning that was, cool but not cold, the sky so blue it looked like someone had run it through the Happy Wheels Carwash, no one moving around much yet, most folks sleeping in a little, like everyone likes to do on Saturdays, if they can.

Mrs. Bukowski's dog wasn't sleeping in. Fuck, no. That dog was a firm believer in rooty-tooty, do your duty. It saw me coming through the picket fence and went charging to the end of its rope as hard as ever, maybe even harder, as if some part of its dim little doggy brain knew it was Saturday and I had no business being there. It hit the end of the rope, *boi-yoi-yoinng*, and went right over backward. It was up again in a second, though, standing at the end of its rope and barking in its choky I'm-strangling-but-I-don't-care way. I suppose Mrs. Bukowski was used to that sound, maybe even liked it, but I've wondered since how the fucking neighbors stood it.

I paid no attention that day. I was too excited to be scared. I fished the chalk out of my pocket and dropped down on one knee. For one second I thought the whole works had gone out of my head, and that was bad. I felt despair and sadness trying to fill me up and I thought, No, don't let it, don't let it, Dinky, fight it. Write anything, even if it's only FUCK MRS. BUKOWSKI'S DOG.

But I didn't write that. I drew this shape, I think it was a sankofite, instead. Some weird shape, but *the right* shape, because it unlocked everything else. My head flooded with stuff. It was wonderful, but at the same time it was really scary because there was so fucking much of it. For the next five minutes or so I knelt there on the sidewalk, sweating like a pig and writing like a mad fiend. I wrote words I'd never heard and drew shapes I'd never seen — shapes *nobody* had ever seen: not just sankofites but japps and fouders and mirks. I wrote and drew until I was pink dust halfway to my right elbow and Ma's piece of chalk was nothing but a little pebble between my thumb and finger. Mrs. Bukowski's dog didn't die like the flies, it barked at me the whole time, and it probably drew back and ran out the length of its rope leash another time or two, but I didn't notice. I was in this total frenzy. I could never describe it to you in a million years, but I bet it's how great musicians like Mozart and Eric Clapton feel when they're writing their music, or how painters feel when they're getting their best work on canvas. If someone had come along, I would have ignored him. Shit, if Mrs. Bukowski's dog had finally broken its rope, jumped the fence, and clamped down on my ass, I probably would have ignored that.

It was eventual, man. It was so fucking eventual I can't even tell you.

No one *did* come, although a few cars went by and maybe the people in them wondered what that kid was doing, what he was drawing on the sidewalk, and Mrs. Bukowski's dog went on barking. At the end, I realized I had to make it stronger, and the way to do that was to make it just for the dog. I didn't know its name, so I printed BOXER with the last of the chalk, drew a circle around it, then made an arrow at the bottom of the circle, pointing to the rest. I felt dizzy and my head was throbbing, the way it does when you've just finished taking a super-hard test, or if you spend too long watching TV. I felt like I was going to be sick...but I still also felt totally eventual.

I looked at the dog — it was still just as lively as ever, barking and kind of prancing on its back legs when it ran out of slack — but that didn't bother me. I went back home feeling easy in my mind. I knew Mrs. Bukowski's dog was toast. The same way, I bet, that a good painter knows when he's painted a good picture, or a good writer knows when he's

written a good story. When it's right, I think you just know. It sits there in your head and hums.

Three days later the dog was eating the old dirt sandwich. I got the story from the best possible source when it comes to mean asshole dogs: the neighborhood mailman. Mr. Shermerhorn, his name was. Mr. Shermerhorn said Mrs. Bukowski's boxer for some reason started running around the tree he was tied to, and when he got to the end of his rope (haha, end of his rope), he couldn't get back. Mrs. Bukowski was out shopping somewhere, so she was no help. When she got home, she found her dog lying at the base of the tree in her side yard, choked to death.

The writing on the sidewalk stayed there for about a week, then it rained hard and afterward there was just a pink blur. But until it rained, it stayed pretty sharp. And while it was sharp, no one walked on it. I saw this for myself. People — kids walking to school, ladies walking downtown, Mr. Shermerhorn, the mailman — would just kind of veer around it. They didn't even seem to know they were doing it. And nobody ever talked about it, either, like "What's up with this weird shit on the sidewalk?" or "What do you suppose you call something that looks like that?" (A foudler, dimbulb.) It was as if they didn't even see it was there. Except part of them must have. Why else would they have walked around it?

10

I didn't tell Mr. Sharpton all that, but I told him what he wanted to know about Skipper. I had decided I could trust him. Maybe that secret part of me knew I could trust him, but I don't think so. I think it was just the way he put his hand on my arm, like your dad would. Not that I have a dad, but I can imagine.

Plus, it was like he said — even if he was a cop and arrested me, what judge and jury would believe Skipper Brannigan had driven his car off the road because of a letter I sent him? Especially one full of nonsense words and symbols made up by a pizza delivery boy who had flunked high school geometry. *Twice.*

When I was done, there was silence between us for a long time. At last Mr. Sharpton said, "He deserved it. You know that, don't you?"

And for some reason that did it. The dam burst and I cried like a baby. I must have cried for fifteen minutes or more. Mr. Sharpton put his arm around me and pulled me against his chest and I watered the lapel of his suit. If someone had driven by and seen us that way, they would have thought we were a couple of queers for sure, but nobody did. There was just him and me under the yellow mercury-vapor lamps, there by the Kart Korral. Yippy-ti-yi-yo, get along little shopping cart, Pug used to sing, for yew know Supr Savr will be yer new home. We'd laugh till we cried.

At last I was able to turn off the waterworks. Mr. Sharpton handed me a hanky and I wiped my eyes with it. "How did you know?" I asked. My voice sounded all deep and weird, like a foghorn.

"Once you were spotted, all it took was a little rudimentary detective work."

"Yeah, but how was I spotted?"

"We have certain people — a dozen or so in all — who look for fellows and gals like you," he said. "They can actually *see* fellows and gals like you, Dink, the way certain satellites in space can see nuclear piles and power plants. You folks show up yellow. Like match flames is how this one spotter described it to me." He shook his head and gave a wry little smile. "I'd like to see something like that just once in my life. Or be able to do what you do. Of course, I'd also like to be given a day — just one would be fine — when I could paint like Picasso or write like Faulkner."

I gaped at him. "Is that true? There are people who can *see* — "

"Yes. They're our bloodhounds. They crisscross the country — and all the other countries — looking for that bright yellow glow. Looking for matchheads in the darkness. This particular young woman was on Route 90, actually headed for Pittsburgh to catch a plane home — to grab a little r-and-r — when she saw you. Or sensed you. Or whatever it is they do. The finders don't really know themselves, any more than you really know what you did to Skipper. Do you?"

"What — "

He raised a hand. "I told you that you wouldn't get all the answers you'd like — this is something you'll have to decide on the basis of what you feel, not on what you know — but I can tell you a couple of things. To begin with, Dink, I work for an outfit called the Trans Corporation. Our

job is getting rid of the world's Skipper Brannigans — the big ones, the ones who do it on a grand scale. We have company headquarters in Chicago and a training center in Peoria...where you'll spend a week, if you agree to my proposal."

I didn't say anything then, but I knew already I was going to say yes to his proposal. Whatever it was, I was going to say yes.

"You're a tranny, my young friend. Better get used to the idea."

"What is it?"

"A trait. There are folks in our organization who think of what you have...what you can do...as a talent or an ability or even a kind of glitch, but they're wrong. Talent and ability are born of trait. Trait is general, talent and ability are specific."

"You'll have to simplify that. I'm a high school dropout, remember."

"I know," he said. "I also know that you didn't drop out because you were stupid, you dropped out because you didn't fit. In that way, you are like every other tranny I've ever met." He laughed in the sharp way people do when they're not really amused. "All twenty-one of them. Now listen to me, and don't play dumb. Creativity is like a hand at the end of your arm. But a hand has many fingers, doesn't it?"

"Well, at least five."

"Think of those fingers as abilities. A creative person may write, paint, sculpt, or think up math formulae; he or she might dance or sing or play a musical instrument. Those are the fingers, but creativity is the hand that gives them life. And just as all hands are basically the same — form follows function — all creative people are the same once you get down to the place where the fingers join.

"Trans is also like a hand. Sometimes its fingers are called precognition, the ability to see the future. Sometimes they're postcognition, the ability to see the past — we have a guy who knows who killed John F. Kennedy, and it wasn't Lee Harvey Oswald; it was, in fact, a woman. There's telepathy, pyrokinesis, telempathy, and who knows how many others. We don't know, certainly; this is a new world, and we've barely begun to explore its first continent. But trans is different from creativity in one vital way: it's much rarer. One person in eight hundred is what occupational psychologists call 'gifted.' We believe that there may only be one tranny in each eight *million* people."

That took my breath away — the idea that you might be one in eight million would take *anybody's* breath away, right?

"That's about a hundred and twenty for every *billion* ordinary folks," he said. "We think there may be no more than seven hundred so-called trannies in the whole world. We're finding them, one by one. It's slow work. The sensing ability is fairly low-level, but we still only have a dozen or so finders, and each one takes a lot of training. This is a hard calling...but it's also fabulously rewarding. We're finding trannies and we're putting them to work. That's what we want to do with you, Dink: put you to work. We want to help you focus your talent, sharpen it, and use it for the betterment of all mankind. You won't be able to see any of your old friends again — there's no security risk on Earth like an old friend, we've found — and there's not a whole lot of cash in it, at least to begin with, but there's a lot of satisfaction, and what I'm going to offer you is only the bottom rung of what may turn out to be a very high ladder."

"Don't forget those fringe benefits," I said, kind of raising my voice on the last word, turning it into a question, if he wanted to take it that way.

He grinned and clapped me on the shoulder. "That's right," he said. "Those famous fringe benefits."

By then I was starting to get excited. My doubts weren't gone, but they were melting away. "So tell me about it," I said. My heart was beating hard, but it wasn't fear. Not anymore. "Make me an offer I can't refuse."

And that's what he did.

11

Three weeks later I'm on an airplane for the first time in my life — and what a way to lose your cherry! The only passenger in a Lear 35, listening to Counting Crows pouring out of quad speakers with a Coke in one hand, watching as the altimeter climbs all the way to 42,000 feet. That's over a mile higher than most commercial jetliners fly, the pilot told me. And a ride as smooth as the seat of a girl's underpants.

I spent a week in Peoria, and I was homesick. *Really* homesick. Surprised the shit out of me. There were a couple of nights when I even cried myself to sleep. I'm ashamed to say that, but I've been truthful so far, and don't want to start lying or leaving things out now.

Ma was the least of what I missed. You'd think we would have been close, as it was "us against the world," in a manner of speaking, but my mother was never much for loving and comforting. She didn't whip on my head or put out her cigarettes in my armpits or anything like that, but so what? I mean, big whoop. I've never had any kids, so I guess I can't say for sure, but I somehow don't think being a great parent is about the stuff you didn't do to your rug-monkeys. Ma was always more into her friends than me, and her weekly trip to the beauty shop, and Friday nights out at the Reservation. Her big ambition in life was to win a twenty-number Bingo and drive home in a brand-new Monte Carlo. I'm not sitting on the pitypot, either. I'm just telling you how it was.

Mr. Sharpton called Ma and told her that I'd been chosen to intern in the Trans Corporation's advanced computer training and placement project, a special deal for non-diploma kids with potential. The story was actually pretty believable. I was a shitty math student and froze up almost completely in classes like English, where you were supposed to talk, but I was always on good terms with the school computers. In fact, although I don't like to brag (and I never let any of the faculty in on this little secret), I could program rings around Mr. Jacubois and Mrs. Wilcoxon. I never cared much about computer games—they're strictly for dickbrains, in my humble opinion, but I could keyjack like a mad motherfucker. Pug used to drop by and watch me, sometimes.

"I can't believe you," he said once. "Man, you got that thing smokin' and tokin'."

I shrugged. "Any fool can peel the Apple," I said. "It takes a real man to eat the core."

So Ma believed it (she might have had a few more questions if she knew the Trans Corporation was flying me out to Illinois in a private jet, but she didn't), and I didn't miss her all that much. But I missed Pug, and John Cassiday, who was our other friend from our Supr Savr days. John plays bass in a punk band, wears a gold ring in his left eyebrow, and has just about every Subpop record ever made. He cried when Kurt Cobain ate the dirt sandwich. Didn't try to hide it or blame it on allergies, either. Just said, "I'm sad because Kurt died." John's eventual.

And I missed Harkerville. Perverse but true. Being at the training center in Peoria was like being born again, somehow, and I guess being born always hurts.

I thought I might meet some other people like me — if this was a book or a movie (or maybe just an episode of *The X-Files*), I would meet a cute chick with nifty little tits and the ability to shut doors from across the room — but that didn't happen. I'm pretty sure there were other trannies at Peoria when I was there, but Dr. Wentworth and the other folks running the place were careful to keep us separated. I once asked why, and got a runaround. That's when I started to realize that not everybody who had TRANSCORP printed on their shirts or walked around with TransCorp clipboards was my pal, or wanted to be my long-lost dad.

And it was about killing people; that's what I was training for. The folks in Peoria didn't talk about that all the time, but no one tried to sugarcoat it, either. I just had to remember the targets were bad guys, dictators and spies and serial killers, and as Mr. Sharpton said, people did it in wars all the time. Plus, it wasn't personal. No guns, no knives, no garrotes. I'd never get blood splashed on me.

Like I told you, I never saw Mr. Sharpton again — at least not yet, I haven't — but I talked to him every day of the week I was in Peoria, and that eased the pain and strangeness considerably. Talking to him was like having someone put a cool cloth on your brow. He gave me his number the night we talked in his Mercedes, and told me to call him anytime. Even at three in the morning, if I was feeling upset. Once I did just that. I almost hung up on the second ring, because people may *say* call them anytime, even at three in the morning, but they don't really expect you to do it. But I hung in there. I was homesick, yeah, but it was more than that. The place wasn't what I had expected, exactly, and I wanted to tell Mr. Sharpton so. See how he took it, kind of.

He answered on the third ring, and although he sounded sleepy (big surprise there, huh), he didn't sound at all pissed. I told him that some of the stuff they were doing was quite weird. The test with all the flashing lights, for example. They said it was a test for epilepsy, but —

"I went to sleep right in the middle of it," I said. "And when I woke up, I had a headache and it was hard to think. You know what I felt like? A file cabinet after someone's been rummaging through it."

"What's your point, Dink?" Mr. Sharpton asked.

"I think they hypnotized me," I said.

A brief pause. Then: "Maybe they did. *Probably* they did."

"But why? Why would they? I'm doing everything they ask, so why would they want to hypnotize me?"

"I don't know all their routines and protocols, but I suspect they're programming you. Putting a lot of housekeeping stuff on the lower levels of your mind so they won't have to junk up the conscious part...and maybe screw up your special ability, while they're at it. Really no different than programming a computer's hard disc, and no more sinister."

"But you don't know for sure?"

"No — as I say, training and testing are not my purview. But I'll make some calls, and Dr. Wentworth will talk to you. It may even be that an apology is due. If that's the case, Dink, you may be sure that it will be tendered. Our trannies are too rare and too valuable to be upset needlessly. Now, is there anything else?"

I thought about it, then said no. I thanked him and hung up. It had been on the tip of my tongue to tell him I thought I'd been drugged, as well...given some sort of mood elevator to help me through the worst of my homesickness, but in the end I decided not to bother him. It was three in the morning, after all, and if they had been giving me anything, it was probably for my own good.

12

Dr. Wentworth came to see me the next day — he was the Big Kahuna — and he *did* apologize. He was perfectly nice about it, but he had a look, I don't know, like maybe Mr. Sharpton had called him about two minutes after I hung up and packed his asshole with some nice hot Minute Rice.

Dr. Wentworth took me for a walk on the back lawn — green and rolling and damned near perfect there at the end of spring — and said he was sorry for not keeping me "up to speed." The epilepsy test really *was* an epilepsy test, he said (and a CAT scan, too), but since it induced a hypnotic state in most subjects, they usually took advantage of it to give certain "baseline instructions." In my case, they were instructions about the computer programs I'd be using in Columbia City. Dr. Wentworth asked me if I had any other questions. I lied and said no.

You probably think that's weird, but it's not. I mean, I had a long and

sucky school career that ended three months short of graduation. I had teachers I liked as well as teachers I hated, but never one I entirely trusted. I was the kind of kid who always sat in the back of the room if the teacher's seating chart wasn't alphabetical, and never took part in class discussions. I mostly said "Huh?" when I was called on, and wild horses wouldn't have dragged a question out of me. Mr. Sharpton was the only guy I ever met who was able to get into where I lived, and ole Doc Wentworth with his bald head and sharp eyes behind his little rimless glasses was no Mr. Sharpton. I could imagine pigs flying south for the winter before I could imagine opening up to that dude, let alone crying on his shoulder.

And fuck, I didn't know what else to ask, anyway. Mostly I liked it in Peoria, and I was excited by the prospects ahead — new job, new house, new town. People were great to me in Peoria. Even the food was great — meatloaf, fried chicken, milkshakes, everything I liked. Okay, I didn't like the diagnostic tests, those boogersnots you have to do with an IBM pencil, and sometimes I'd feel dopey, as if someone had put something in my mashed potatoes (or hyper, sometimes I'd feel that way, too), and there were other times — at least two — when I was pretty sure I'd been hypnotized again. But so what? I mean, was any of it a big deal after you'd been chased around a supermarket parking lot by a maniac who was laughing and making race-car noises and trying to run you over with a shopping cart?

13

I had one more talk on the phone with Mr. Sharpton that I suppose I should mention. That was just a day before my second airplane ride, the one that took me to Columbia City, where a guy was waiting with the keys to my new house. By then I knew about the cleaners, and the basic money-rule — start every week broke, end every week broke — and I knew who to call locally if I had a problem. (Any big problem and I call Mr. Sharpton, who is technically my "control.") I had maps, a list of restaurants, directions to the cinema complex and the mall. I had a line on everything but the most important thing of all.

"Mr. Sharpton, I don't know what to do," I said. I was talking to him

on the phone just outside the caff. There was a phone in my room, but by then I was too nervous to sit down, let alone lie on my bed. If they were still putting shit in my food, it sure wasn't working that day.

"I can't help you there, Dink," he said, calm as ever. "So solly, Cholly."

"What do you mean? You've got to help me! You *recruited* me, for jeepers' sake!"

"Let me give you a hypothetical case. Suppose I'm the President of a well-endowed college. Do you know what well-endowed means?"

"Lots of bucks. I'm not stupid, I told you that."

"So you did — I apologize. Anyhow, let's say that I, President Sharpton, use some of my school's plentiful bucks to hire a great novelist as the writer in residence, or a great pianist to teach music. Would that entitle me to tell the novelist what to write, or the pianist what to compose?"

"Probably not."

"*Absolutely* not. But let's say it did. If I told the novelist, 'Write a comedy about Betsy Ross screwing around with George Washington in Gay Paree,' do you think he could do it?"

I got laughing. I couldn't help it. Mr. Sharpton's just got a vibe about him, somehow.

"Maybe," I said. "Especially if you whipped a bonus on the guy."

"Okay, but even if he held his nose and cranked it out, it would likely be a very bad novel. Because creative people aren't always in charge. And when they do their best work, they're hardly *ever* in charge. They're just sort of rolling along with their eyes shut, yelling *Wheeeee*."

"What's all that got to do with me? Listen, Mr. Sharpton — when I try to imagine what I'm going to do in Columbia City, all I see is a great big blank. Help people, you said. Make the world a better place. Get rid of the Skippers. All that sounds great, except *I don't know how to do it!*"

"You will," he said. "When the time comes, you will."

"You said Wentworth and his guys would focus my talent. Sharpen it. Mostly what they did was give me a bunch of stupid tests and make me feel like I was back in school. Is it *all* in my subconscious? Is it *all* on the hard disc?"

"Trust me, Dink," he said. "Trust me, and trust yourself."

So I did. I have. But just lately, things haven't been so good. Not so good at all.

That goddam Neff — all the bad stuff started with him. I wish I'd never seen his picture. And if I *had* to see a picture, I wish I'd seen one where he wasn't smiling.

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My first week in Columbia City, I did nothing. I mean absolutely zilch. I didn't even go to the movies. When the cleaners came, I just went to the park and sat on a bench and felt like the whole world was watching me. When it came time to get rid of my extra money on Thursday, I ended up shredding better than fifty dollars in the garbage disposal. And doing that was new to me then, remember. Talk about feeling *weird* — man, you don't have a clue. While I was standing there, listening to the motor under the sink grinding away, I kept thinking about Ma. If Ma had been there to see what I was doing, she would have probably run me through with a butcher knife to make me stop. That was a dozen twenty-number Bingo games (or two dozen coveralls) going straight down the kitchen pig.

I slept like shit that week. Every now and then I'd go to the little study — I didn't want to, but my feet would drag me there. Like they say murderers always return to the scenes of their crimes, I guess. Anyway, I'd stand there in the doorway and look at the dark computer screen, at the Global Village modem, and I'd just sweat with guilt and embarrassment and fear. Even the way the desk was so neat and clean, without a single paper or note on it, made me sweat. I could all but hear the walls muttering stuff like "Nah, nothing going on in here, it's really just a closet" and "Who's *this* turkey, the cable installer?"

I had nightmares. In one of them, the doorbell rings and when I open it, Mr. Sharpton's there. He's got a pair of handcuffs. "Put out your wrists, Dink," he says. "We thought you were a tranny, but obviously we were wrong. Sometimes it happens."

"No, I am," I say. "I am a tranny, I just need a little more time to get acclimated. I've never been away from home before, remember."

"You've had five years," he goes.

I'm stunned. I can't believe it. But part of me knows it's true. It feels like days, but it's really been *five fucking years*, and I haven't turned on the computer in the little study a single time. If not for the cleaners, the desk it sits on would be six inches deep in dust.

"Hold out your hands, Dink. Stop making this hard on both of us."

"I won't," I say, "and you can't make me."

He looked behind him then, and who should come up the steps but Skipper Brannigan. He was wearing his red nylon tunic, only now TRANSCORP was sewn on it instead of SUPR SAVR. He looked pale but otherwise okay. Not dead is what I mean. "You thought you did something to me, but you didn't," Skipper said. "You couldn't do anything to anyone. You're just a hippie waste."

"I'm going to put these cuffs on him," Mr. Sharpton says to Skipper. "If he gives me any trouble, run him over with a shopping cart."

"Totally eventual," Skipper said, and I woke up half out of my bed and on the floor, screaming.

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Then, about ten days after I moved in, I had another kind of dream. I don't remember what it was, but it must have been a good one, because when I woke up, I was smiling. I could feel it on my face, a big, happy smile. It was like when I woke up with the idea about Mrs. Bukowski's dog. Almost exactly like that.

I pulled on a pair of jeans and went into the study. I turned on the computer and opened the window marked TOOLS. There was a program in there called DINKY'S NOTEBOOK. I went right to it, and all my symbols were there — circles, triangles, japps, mirks, rhomboids, bews, smims, fouders, hundreds more. *Thousands* more. *Maybe millions* more. It's sort of like Mr. Sharpton said: a new world, and I'm on the coastline of the first continent.

All I know is that all at once it was *there* for me, I had a great big Macintosh computer to work with instead of a little piece of pink chalk, and all I had to do was type the words for the symbols and the symbols would appear. I was jacked to the max, I mean my God. It was like a river of fire burning in the middle of my head. I wrote, I called up symbols, I used

the mouse to drag everything where it was supposed to be. And when it was done, I had a letter. One of the special letters.

But a letter to who?

A letter to where?

Then I realized it didn't matter. Make a few minor customizing touches, and there were many people the letter could go to...although this one had been written for a man rather than a woman. I don't know how I knew that; I just did. I decided to start with Cincinnati, only because Cincinnati was the first city to come into my mind. It could as easily have been Zurich, Switzerland, or Waterville, Maine.

I tried to open a TOOLS program titled DINKYMAIL. Before the computer would let me in there, it prompted me to wake up my modem. Once the modem was running, the computer wanted a 312 area code. 312's Chicago, and I imagine that, as far as the phone company is concerned, my compu-calls all come from TransCorp's headquarters. I didn't care one way or another; that was their business. I had found my business and was taking care of it.

With the modem awake and linked to Chicago, the computer flashed
DINKYMAIL READY

I clicked on LOCALE. I'd been in the study almost three hours by then, with only one break to take a quick piss, and I could smell myself, sweating and stinking like a monkey in a greenhouse. I didn't mind. I liked the smell. I was having the time of my life. I was fucking delirious.

I typed CINCINNATI and hit EXECUTE.

NO LISTINGS CINCINNATI

the computer said. Okay, not a problem. Try Columbus — closer to home, anyway. And yes, folks! We have a Bingo.

TWO LISTINGS COLUMBUS

There were two telephone numbers. I clicked on the top one, curious and a little afraid of what might pop out. But it wasn't a dossier, a profile, or — God forbid — a photograph. There was one single word:

MUFFIN

Say *what*?

But then I knew. Muffin was Mr. Columbus's pet. Maybe a cat. I called up my special letter again, transposed two symbols and deleted a third.

Then I added MUFFIN to the top, with an arrow pointing down. There. Perfect.

Did I wonder who Muffin's owner was, or what he had done to warrant TransCorp's attention, or exactly what was going to happen to him? I did not. The idea that my conditioning at Peoria might have been partially responsible for this disinterest never crossed my mind, either. I was doing my thing, that was all. Just doing my thing, and as happy as a clam at high tide.

I called the number on the screen. I had the computer's speaker on, but there was no hello, only the screechy mating call of another computer. Just as well, really. Life's easier when you subtract the human element. Then it's like that movie, *Twelve O'Clock High*, cruising over Berlin in your trusty B-52, looking through your Norden bombsight and waiting for just the right moment to push the button. You might see smokestacks, or factory roofs, but no people. The guys who dropped the bombs from their trusty B-52s didn't have to hear the screams of mothers whose children had just been reduced to jelly-covered guts, and I didn't even have to hear anyone say hello. A very good deal.

After a little bit, I turned off the speaker anyway. I found it distracting.

MODEM FOUND

the computer flashed, and then

SEARCH FOR E-MAIL ADDRESS Y/N

I typed Y and waited. This time the wait was longer. I think the computer was going back to Chicago again, and getting what it needed to unlock the e-mail address of Mr. Columbus. Still, it was less than thirty seconds before the computer was right back at me with

E-MAIL ADDRESS FOUND

SEND DINKYMAIL Y/N

I typed Y with absolutely no hesitation. The computer flashed

SENDING DINKYMAIL

and then

DINKYMAIL SENT

That was all. No fireworks.

I wonder what happened to Muffin, though.

You know. After.

That night I called Mr. Sharpton and said, "I'm working."

"That's good, Dink. Great news. Feel better?" Calm as ever. Mr. Sharpton is like the weather in Tahiti.

"Yeah," I said. The fact was, I felt blissful. It was the best day of my life. Doubts or no doubts, worries or no worries, I still say that. The most eventual day of my life. It was like a river of fire in my head, *a fucking river of fire*, can you get that? "Do you feel better, Mr. Sharpton? Relieved?"

"I'm happy for you, but I can't say I'm relieved, because — "

" — you were never worried in the first place."

"Got it in one," he said.

"Everything's eventual, in other words."

He laughed at that. He always laughs when I say that. "That's right, Dink. Everything's eventual."

"Mr. Sharpton?"

"Yes?"

"E-mail's not exactly private, you know. Anybody who's really dedicated can hack into it."

"Part of what you send is a suggestion that the recipient delete the message from all files, is it not?"

"Yes, but I can't absolutely guarantee that he'll do it. Or she."

"Even if they don't, nothing can happen to someone else who chances on such a message, am I correct? Because it's...personalized."

"Well, it might give someone a headache, but that would be about all."

"And the communication itself would look like so much gibberish."

"Or a code."

He laughed heartily at that. "Let them try to break it, Dinky, eh? Just let them try!"

I sighed. "I suppose."

"Let's discuss something more important, Dink...how did it *feel*?"

"Fucking *wonderful*."

"Good. Don't question wonder, Dink. Don't ever question wonder." And he hung up.

Sometimes I have to send actual letters — print out the stuff I whomp up in DINKY'S NOTEBOOK, stick it in an envelope, lick stamps, and mail it off to somebody somewhere. Professor Ann Tevitch, University of New Mexico at Las Cruces. Mr. Andrew Neff, C/O The New York Post, New York, New York. Billy Unger, General Delivery, Stovington, Vermont. Only names, but they were still more upsetting than the phone numbers. More *personal* than the phone numbers. It was like seeing faces swim up at you for a second inside your Norden bombsight. I mean, what a freak-out, right? You're up there at 25,000 feet, no faces allowed up there, but sometimes one shows up for a second or two, just the same.

I wondered how a University Professor could get along without a modem (or a guy whose address was a fucking New York newspaper, for that matter), but I never wondered too much. I didn't have to. We live in a modern world, but letters don't *have* to be sent by computer, after all. There's still a post office. And the stuff I really needed was always in the database. The fact that Unger had a 1957 Thunderbird, for instance. Or that Ann Tevitch had a vanity license plate.

And people like Tevitch and Unger were exceptions. Most of the folks I reach out and touch are like that first one in Columbus — fully equipped for the twenty-first century. **SENDING DINKYMAIL, DINKYMAIL SENT**, velly good, so long, Cholly.

I could have gone on like that for a long time, maybe forever — browsing the database (there's no schedule to follow, no list of primary cities and targets; I'm completely on my own...unless all that shit is *also* in my subconscious, down there on the hard disc), going to afternoon movies, enjoying the Ma-less silence of my little house, and dreaming of my next step up the ladder, except I woke up feeling horny one day. I worked for an hour or so, browsing around in Australia, but it was no good — my dick kept trespassing on my brain, so to speak. I shut off the computer and went down to News Plus to see if I could find a magazine featuring pretty ladies in frothy lingerie.

As I got there, a guy was coming out, reading the Columbus *Dispatch*. I never read the paper myself. Why bother? It's the same old shit day in and day out, dictators beating the ching-chong out of people weaker than they

are, men in uniforms beating the ching-chong out of soccer balls or footballs, politicians kissing babies and kissing ass. Mostly stories about the Skipper Brannigans of the world, in other words. And I wouldn't have seen this story even if I'd happened to look at the newspaper display rack once I got inside, because it was on the bottom half of the front page, below the fold. But this fucking dimbulb comes out with the paper hanging open and his face buried inside it.

In the lower right corner was a picture of a white-haired guy smoking a pipe and smiling. He looked like a good-humored fuck, probably Irish, eyes all crinkled up and these white bushy eyebrows. And the headline over the photo—not a big one, but you could read it—said NEFF SUICIDE STILL PUZZLES, GRIEVES COLLEAGUES.

For a second or two I thought I'd just skip News Plus that day, I didn't feel like ladies in lingerie after all, maybe I'd just go home and take a nap. If I went in, I'd probably pick up a copy of the *Dispatch*, wouldn't be able to help myself, and I wasn't sure I wanted to know any more about that Irish-looking guy than I already did...which was nothing at all, as you can fucking believe I hastened to tell myself. Neff couldn't be that weird a name anyway, only four letters, not like Shittendookus or Horecake, there must be thousands of Neffs, if you're talking coast to coast. This one didn't have to be the Neff I knew about, the one who loved Frank Sinatra records.

It would be better, in any case, to just leave and come back tomorrow. Tomorrow the picture of that guy with the pipe would be gone. Tomorrow somebody else's picture would be there, on the lower right corner of page one. People always dying, right? People who aren't superstars or anything, just famous enough to get their pictures down there in the lower right corner of page one. And sometimes people were puzzled about it, the way folks back home in Harkerville had been puzzled about Skipper's death—no alcohol in his blood, clear night, dry road, not the suicidal type.

The world is full of mysteries like that, though, and sometimes it's best not to solve them. Sometimes the solutions aren't, you know, too eventual.

But willpower has never been my strong point. I can't always keep away from the chocolate, even though I know my skin doesn't like it, and I couldn't keep away from the Columbus *Dispatch* that day. I went on

inside and bought one. Didn't even bother with any ladies in lingerie — had forgotten all about them, in fact.

I started home, then had a funny thought. The funny thought was that I didn't want a newspaper with Andrew Neff's picture on the front page going out with my trash. The trash pick-up guys came in a city truck, surely they didn't — *couldn't* — have anything to do with TransCorp, but...

There was this show me and Pug used to watch one summer back when we were little kids. *Golden Years*, it was called. You probably don't remember it. Anyway, there was a guy on that show who used to say "Perfect paranoia is perfect awareness." It was like his motto. And I sort of believe that.

Anyway, I went to the park instead of back home. I sat on a bench and read the story, and when I was done, I stuck the paper in a park trash barrel. I didn't even like doing that, but hey — if Mr. Sharpton has got a guy following me around and checking on every little thing I throw away, I'm totally fucked no matter what.

There was no doubt that Andrew Neff, age sixty-two, a columnist for the *Post* since 1970, had committed suicide. He took a bunch of pills that probably would have done the trick, then climbed into his bathtub, put a plastic bag over his head, and rounded the evening off by slitting his wrists. There was a man totally dedicated to avoiding counseling.

He left no note, though, and the autopsy showed no signs of disease. His colleagues scoffed at the idea of Alzheimer's, or even early senility. "He was the sharpest guy I've ever known, right up to the day he died," a guy named Pete Hamil said. "He could have gone on *Challenge Jeopardy* and run both boards. I have no idea why Andy did such a thing." Hamil went on to say that one of Neff's "charming oddities" was his complete refusal to participate in the computer revolution. No modems for him, no laptop word processor, no handheld spell-checker from Franklin Electronic Publishers. He didn't even have a CD player in his apartment, Hamil said; Neff claimed, perhaps only half-joking, that compact discs were the devil's work. He loved the Chairman of the Board, but only on vinyl.

This guy Hamil and several others said Neff was unfailingly cheerful, right up to the afternoon he filed his last column, went home, drank a glass

of wine, and then demo'd himself. One of the *Post*'s chatter columnists, Liz Smith, said she'd shared a piece of pie with him just before he left on that last day, and Neff had seemed "a trifle distracted, but otherwise just fine."

Distracted, sure. With a headful of fouders, bews, and smims, you'd be distracted, too.

Neff, the piece went on, had been something of an anomaly on the *Post*, which sticks up for the more conservative view of life — I guess they don't come right out and recommend electrocuting welfare recipients after three years and still no job, but they *do* hint that it's always an option. Neff was more or less the house liberal. He wrote a column called "Eneff is Eneff," and in it he talked about changing the way New York treated single teen mothers, suggested that maybe abortion wasn't always murder, argued that the low-income housing in the outer boroughs was a self-perpetuating hate machine. Near the end of his life, he'd been writing columns about the size of the military, and asking why we as a country felt we had to keep pouring on the bucks when there was, essentially, no one left to fight except for that guy in Iraq, the one who looks like Wayne Newton. He said we'd do better to spend that money creating jobs. And *Post* readers, who would have crucified anyone else saying stuff like that, pretty much loved it when Neff laid it down. Because he was funny. Because he was charming. Maybe because he was Irish and had kissed the Blarney Stone.

That was about all. I started home. Somewhere along the way I took a detour, though, and ended up walking all over downtown. I zigged and zagged, walking down boulevards and cutting through parking lots, all the time thinking about Andrew Neff climbing into his bathtub and putting a Ziploc Baggie over his head. A big one, a gallon-size, keeps all your leftovers supermarket-fresh.

He was funny. He was charming. And I had killed him. Neff had opened my letter and it had gotten into his head, somehow. Judging by what I'd read in the paper, the special words and symbols took maybe three days to tear him apart enough to swallow the pills and climb into the tub.

He deserved it.

That's what Mr. Sharpton said about Skipper, and maybe he was right...that time. But did Neff deserve it? Was there shit about him I didn't

know, did he maybe like little girls in the wrong way or push dope or go after people too weak to fight back, like Skipper had gone after me with the shopping cart?

We want to help you use your talent for the betterment of all mankind, Mr. Sharpton said, and surely that didn't mean making a guy off himself because he thought the Defense Department was spending too much money on smart-bombs. Paranoid shit like that is strictly for movies starring Steven Seagal and Jean-Claude Van Damme —

Then I had a bad idea — a scary idea.

Maybe TransCorp didn't want him dead because he wrote that stuff.

Maybe they wanted him dead because people — the wrong people — were starting to *think* about what he wrote.

"That's crazy," I said, right out loud, and a woman looking into the window of Columbia City, Very Pretty turned around and gave me the old fish-eye.

I ended up at the public library around two o'clock, with my legs aching and my head throbbing. I kept seeing that guy in the bathtub, with his wrinkled old man's tits and white chest-hair, his nice smile gone, replaced by this vague Planet X look. I kept seeing him putting a Baggie over his head, humming a Sinatra tune ("My Way," maybe) as he snugged it down tight, then peered through it the way you'd peer through a cloudy window, so he could see to slit the veins in his wrists. I didn't want to see that stuff, but I couldn't stop. My bombsight had turned into a telescope.

They had a computer room in the library, and you could get on the Internet at a very reasonable cost. I had to get a library card, too, but that was okay. A library card is good to have, you can never have too much ID.

It took me only three bucks' worth of time to find Ann Tevitch and call up the report of her death. The story started, I saw with a sinking sensation, in the bottom right-hand corner of page one, The Official Dead Folks' Nook, and then jumped to the obituary page. Professor Tevitch had been a pretty lady, blonde, thirty-seven. In the photo she was holding her glasses in her hand, as if she wanted people to know she wore them...but as if she'd wanted people to see what pretty eyes she had, too. That made me feel sad and guilty.

Her death was startlingly like Skipper's — coming home from her office at UNM just after dark, maybe hurrying a little because it was her

turn to make supper, but what the hell, good driving conditions and great visibility. Her car — vanity license plate DNA FAN, I happened to know — had veered off the road, overturned, and landed in a dry wash. She was still alive when someone spotted the headlights and found her, but there had never been any real hope; her injuries were too grave.

There was no alcohol in her system and her marriage was in good shape (no kids, at least, thank God for small favors), so the idea of suicide was farfetched. She had been looking forward to the future, had even talked about getting a computer to celebrate a new research grant. She'd refused to own a PC since 1988 or so; had lost some valuable data in one when it locked up, and had distrusted them ever since. She would use her department's equipment when she absolutely had to, but that was all.

The coroner's verdict had been accidental death.

Professor Ann Tevitch, a clinical biologist, had been in the forefront of West Coast AIDS research. Another scientist, this one in California, said that her death might set back the search for a cure five years. "She was a key player," he said. "Smart, yes, but more — I once heard someone refer to her as 'a natural-born facilitator,' and that's as good a description as any. Ann was the kind of person who holds other people together. Her death is a great loss to the dozens of people who knew and loved her, but it's an even greater loss to this cause."

Billy Unger was also easy enough to find. His picture topped page one of the *Stovington Weekly Courant* instead of getting stuck down there in the Dead Folks' Corner, but that might have been because there weren't many famous people in Stovington. Unger had been General William "Roll 'Em" Unger, winner of the Silver Star and Bronze Star in Korea. During the Kennedy administration he was the Undersecretary of Defense, and one of the really big war-hawks of that time. Kill the Russkies, drink their blood, keep America safe for the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, all that sort of thing.

Then, around the time Lyndon Johnson was escalating the war in Vietnam, Billy Unger had a change of mind and heart. He began writing letters to newspapers. He started his op-ed page career by saying that we were handling the war wrong. He progressed to the idea that we were wrong to be in Vietnam at all. Then, around 1975 or so, he got to the point of saying *all* wars were wrong. That was okay with most Vermonters.

He served seven terms in the state legislature, starting in 1978. When a group of Progressive Democrats asked him to run for the U.S. Senate in 1992, he said he wanted to "do some reading and consider his options." The implication was that he would be ready for a national career in politics by 1996, 2000 at the latest. He was getting old, but Vermonters like old guys, I guess. Nineteen ninety-six went past without Unger declaring himself a candidate for anything (possibly because his wife died of cancer), and long before 2000 came around, he bought himself a big old dirt sandwich and ate every bite.

There was a small but loyal contingent in Stovington that claimed Roll 'Em's death was an accident, that Silver Star winners don't jump off their roofs even if they *have* lost a wife to cancer in the last year or so, but the rest pointed out that the guy probably hadn't been repairing the shingles — not in his nightshirt, not at two o'clock in the morning.

Suicide was the verdict.

Yeah. Right.

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I left the library and thought I'd go home. Instead, I went back to the same park bench again. I sat there until the sun was low and the place had pretty much emptied out of kids and Frisbee-catching dogs. And although I'd been in Columbia City for three months by then, it was the latest I'd ever been out. That's sad, I guess. I thought I was living a life here, finally getting away from Ma and living a life, but all I've been doing is throwing a shadow.

If people, certain people, were checking up on me, they might wonder why the change in routine. So I got up, went on home, boiled up a bag of that shit on a shingle stuff, and turned on my TV. I've got cable, the full package including premium movie channels, and I've never seen a single bill. How's that for an eventual deal? I turned on Cinemax. Rutger Hauer was playing a blind karate fighter. I sat down on the couch beneath my fake Rembrandt and watched the show. I didn't see it, but I ate my chow and looked at it.

I thought about stuff. About a newspaper columnist who had liberal ideas and a conservative readership. About an AIDS researcher who served

an important linking function with other AIDS researchers. About an old general who changed his mind. I thought about the fact that I only knew these three by name because they didn't have modems and e-mail capability.

There was other stuff to think about, too. Like how you could hypnotize a talented guy, or drug him, or maybe even expose him to other talented guys in order to keep him from asking any of the wrong questions or doing any of the wrong things. Like how you could make sure such a talented guy couldn't run away even if he happened to wake up to the truth. You'd do that by setting him up in what was, essentially, a cashless existence....a life where rule number one was no rat-holing any extra dough, not even pocket change. What sort of talented guy would fall for something like that? A naive one, with few friends and next to no self-image. A guy who would sell you his talented soul for a few groceries and seventy bucks a week, because he believes that's about what it's worth.

I didn't want to think about any of that. I tried to concentrate on Rutger Hauer, doing all that amusing blind karate shit (Pug would have laughed his ass off if he'd been there, believe me), so I wouldn't *have* to think about any of that.

Two hundred, for instance. There was a number I didn't want to think about. 200. 10 x 20, 40 x 5. CC, to the old Romans. At least two hundred times I'd pushed the button that brought the message **DINKYMAIL SENT** up on my screen.

It occurred to me — for the first time, as if I was finally waking up — that I was a murderer. A mass murderer.

Yes indeed. That's what it came down to.

Good of mankind? Bad of mankind? Indifferent of mankind? Who made those judgments? Mr. Sharpton? His bosses? *Their* bosses? And did it matter?

I decided it didn't matter a fuck in a rabbit hutch. I further decided I really couldn't spend too much time moaning (even to myself) how I had been drugged, hypnotized, or exposed to some kind of mind control. The truth was, I'd been doing what I was doing because I loved the feeling I got when I was composing the special letters, the feeling that there was a river of fire running through the center of my head.

Mostly, I'd been doing it because I could.

"That's not true," I said...but not real loud. I whispered it under my breath. They probably don't have any bugs planted here, I'm sure they don't, but it's best to be safe.

I started writing this...what is it? A report, maybe. I started writing this report later that night...as soon as the Rutger Hauer movie was over, in fact. I write in a notebook, though, not on my computer, and I write in plain old English. No sankofites, no bews, no smims. There's a loose floor-tile under the Ping-Pong table down in the basement. That's where I keep my report. I just now looked back at how I started. *I've got a good job now*, I wrote, *and no reason to feel glum*. Idiotic. But of course, any fool who can pucker is apt to whistle past the graveyard.

When I went to bed that night, I dreamed I was in the parking lot of the Supr Savr. Pug was there, wearing his red duster and a hat on his head like the one Mickey Mouse wore in *Fantasia* — that's the movie where Mickey played the Sorcerer's Apprentice. Halfway across the parking lot, shopping carts were lined up in a row. Pug would raise his hand, then lower it. Each time he did this, a cart would start rolling by itself, gathering speed, rushing across the lot until it crashed into the brick side of the supermarket. They were piling up there, a glittering junkheap of metal and wheels. For once in his life, Pug wasn't smiling. I wanted to ask him what he was doing and what it meant, but of course I knew.

"He's been good to me," I told Pug in this dream. It was Mr. Sharpton I meant, of course. "He's been really, really eventual."

Pug turned fully to me then, and I saw it wasn't Pug at all. It was Skipper, and his head had been smashed in all the way down to the eyebrows. Shattered hunks of skull stuck up in a circle, making him look like he was wearing a bone crown.

"You're not looking through a bombsight," Skipper said, and grinned. "You are the bombsight. How do you like that, Dinkster?"

I woke up in the dark of my room, sweating, with my hands over my mouth to hold in a scream, so I guess I didn't like it very much.

Writing this has been a sad education, let me tell you. It's like hey, Dink, welcome to the real world. Mostly it's the image of grinding up

dollar bills in the kitchen pig that comes to me when I think about what has happened to me, but I know that's only because it's easier to think of grinding up money (or chucking it into the storm drain) than it is to think about grinding up people. Sometimes I hate myself, sometimes I'm scared for my immortal soul (if I have one), and sometimes I'm just embarrassed. Trust me, Mr. Sharpton said, and I did. I mean, duh, how dumb can you get? I tell myself I'm just a kid, the same age as the kids who crewed those B-52s I sometimes think about, that kids are allowed to be dumb. But I wonder if that's true when lives are at stake.

And, of course, I'm still doing it.

Yes.

I thought at first that I wouldn't be able to, no more than the kids in *Peter Pan* could keep floating around when they lost their happy thoughts ...but I could. And once I sat down in front of the computer screen and that river of fire started to flow, I was lost. You see (at least I *think* you do), this is what I was put on Planet Earth for. Can I be blamed for doing the thing that finishes me off, that completes me?

Answer: yes. Absolutely.

But I can't stop. Sometimes I tell myself that I've gone on because if I do stop — maybe even for a day — they'll know I've caught on, and the cleaners will make an unscheduled stop. Except what they'll clean up this time will be me. But that's not why. I do it because I'm just another addict, same as a guy smoking crack in an alley or some chick taking a spike in her arm. I do it because of the hateful fucking rush, I do it because when I'm working in DINKY'S NOTEBOOK, everything's eventual. It's like being caught in a candy trap. And it's all the fault of that dork who came out of News Plus with his fucking *Dispatch* open. If not for him, I'd still see nothing but cloud-hazy buildings in the crosshairs. No people, just targets.

You are the *bombsight*, Skipper said in my dream. You are the *bombsight*, *Dinkster*.

That's true. I know it is. Humiliating but true. I'm just another tool, just the lens the *real* bombardier looks through. Just the button he pushes.

What bombardier, you ask?

Oh come on, get real.

I thought of calling him, how's that for crazy? Or maybe it's not. "Call

me anytime, Dink, even three in the morning." That's what the man said, and I'm pretty sure that's what the man meant — about that, at least, Mr. Sharpton wasn't lying.

I thought of calling him and saying, "You want to know what hurts the most, Mr. Sharpton? That thing you said about how I could make the world a better place by getting rid of people like Skipper. The truth is, you guys are Skipper."

Sure. And I'm the shopping cart they chase people with, laughing and barking and making race-car sounds. I work cheap, too...at bargain-basement rates. So far I've killed over two hundred people, and what did it cost TransCorp? A little house in a third-rate Ohio town, seventy bucks a week, and a Honda automobile. Plus cable TV. Don't want to forget that.

I stood there for a while, looking at the telephone, then put it down again. Couldn't say any of that. It would be the same as putting a Ziploc bag over my head and then slitting my wrists.

So what am I going to do?

Oh God, what am I going to do?

20

It's been two weeks since I last took this notebook out from under the basement tile and wrote in it. Twice I've heard the mail-slot clack on Thursdays, during *As the World Turns*, and gone out into the hall to get my money. I've gone to four movies, all in the afternoon. Twice I've ground up money in the kitchen pig, and thrown my loose change down the storm-drain, hiding what I was doing behind the blue plastic recycling basket when I put it down on the curb. Once I went down to News Plus, thinking I'd get a copy of *Variations* or *Forum*, but there was a headline on the front of the *Dispatch* that took away any sexy feelings I might have had. POPE DIES OF HEART ATTACK ON PEACE MISSION, it said.

Did I do it? Nah, the story said he died in Asia, and I've been sticking to the American northwest these last few weeks. But I could have been the one. If I'd been nosing around in Pakistan last week, I very likely *would* have been the one.

Two weeks of living in a nightmare.

Then, this morning, there was something in the mail. Not a letter,

I've only gotten three or four of those (all from Pug, and now he's stopped writing, and I miss him so much), but a Kmart advertising circular. It flopped open just as I was putting it into the trash, and something fluttered out. A note, printed in block letters. DO YOU WANT OUT? it read. IF YES, SEND MESSAGE *"DON'T STAND SO CLOSE TO ME" IS BEST POLICE SONG.*

My heart was beating hard and fast, the way it did on the day I came into my house and saw the Rembrandt fake over the sofa where the velvet clowns had been.

Below the message, someone had drawn a foudier. It was harmless just sitting there all by itself, but looking at it still made all the spit in my mouth dry up. It was a real message, the foudier proved it, but who had it come from? And how did the sender know about me?

I went into the study, walking slowly with my head down, thinking. A message tucked into an advertising circular. Hand-written and tucked into an advertising circular. That meant someone close. Someone in town.

I turned on my computer and modem. I called the Columbia City Public Library, where you can surf cheap...and in relative anonymity. Anything I sent would go through TransCorp in Chicago, but that wasn't going to matter. They weren't going to suspect a thing. Not if I was careful.

And, of course, if there was anybody there.

There was. My computer connected with the library's computer, and a menu flashed on my screen. For just a moment, something else flashed on my screen, as well.

A smim.

In the lower right-hand corner. Just a flicker.

I sent the message about the best Police song and added a little touch of my own down in the Dead Folks' Nook: a sankofite.

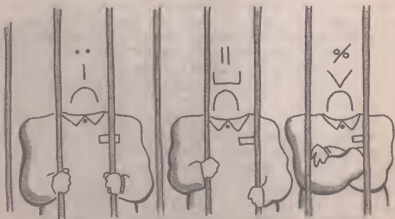
I could write more — things have started to happen, and I believe that soon they'll be happening fast — but I don't think it would be safe. Up to now, I've just talked about myself. If I went any further, I'd have to talk about other people. But there are two more things I want to say.

First, that I'm sorry for what I've done — even for what I did to Skipper. I'd take it back if I could. I didn't know what I was doing. I know that's a piss-poor excuse, but it's the only one I have.

Second, I've got it in mind to write one more special letter...the most special of all.

I have Mr. Sharpton's e-mail address. And I have something even better: a memory of how he stroked his lucky tie as we sat in his big expensive Krautmobile. The loving way he ran his palm over those silk swords. So, you see, I know just enough about him. I know just what to add to his letter, how to make it eventual. I can close my eyes and see one word floating there in the darkness behind my lids — floating there like black fire, deadly as an arrow fired into the brain, and it's the only word that matters:

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COMING ATTRACTIONS

LISTEN CLOSELY and you can hear those sleigh bells ringing in the distance. That's right, You Know Who is coming to town soon. Whether your taste is for something naughty or something nice, our December issue is the place to be.

David Bischoff takes us across the pond to England to bring us a folk rock group whose time has come and gone—or maybe they're separate from time entirely—in his tale "In the Bleak Mid Solstice."

K. D. Wentworth provides one of the stranger imaginative revisions of Christmas we can recall in " 'Tis the Season." You'll have to read it to see; if we try to describe this hardboiled religious tale, you'll think we've already sampled too much eggnog.

Paul Park makes his first appearance in these pages next month with "Get a Grip," a story of a New Yorker whose life is getting stranger every day. Isn't everyone's? In this case, however, there's an answer to the question of why it's all getting weirder, and as you might expect the answer's pretty weird itself.

In the months to come we'll have new stories by Nina Kiriki Hoffman, James P. Blaylock, newcomer Robert Grossbach, Richard Bowes, Sheila Finch, and Ian Watson, book columns from Douglas E. Winter and Elizabeth Hand, science columns, and lots more goodies. Be sure to hang your stocking where we can find it; we don't intend to give you any lumps of coal (even if you've had a naughty moment or two this year).



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